

Enhancing Children's Learning: A pilot study of the application of systemic approaches in primary schools

**A research report for the DfES by the nowherefoundation
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Introduction

“Just like ‘Connect 4’ – Beech class has become ‘Connect 21’. Everyone has slotted into their place – and feels happy there – knowing how they are in the group - who they are in the group – that they are all important. Every child seems to know each other at a level I am convinced could not be accessed without systemic practices: they have a tolerance, an understanding. They know how each other will react, know each other’s deep likes and dislikes and they can show this most respectfully, most deeply...Beech class in itself, as someone commented, cannot truly be itself, be happy, if its community is not in harmony.”

Caroline Evans July 2004

This report is an explanation of a pilot study called ‘Enhancing Children’s Learning’ that was conducted by the **nowhere**foundation in partnership with six primary schools in Warminster, Wiltshire. The project was run during the spring and summer terms 2004 and was funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Innovation Unit.

The central question was:

How can teachers use systemic approaches to enhance children’s learning?

The project was an exploration of the use of practices that enable teachers and children to view and experience their class groups and schools as systems – and apply their insights to removing blocks to learning. Although only a small study, the effect on the participants

- getting a better understanding of pupils’ needs and capability
- shaping provision to suit need
- developing a culture that supports learning

has exceeded our expectations.

The indications are that, by using simple systemic and phenomenological approaches to subtly shift perceptions, both teachers and their pupils are much better placed to engage with learning. *(See Appendix One for an explanation of a phenomenological approach)*

Ten staff in total, including heads, teachers and teaching assistants, took part in the pilot project as teacher-researchers. They were supported and guided by Alison Barclay and Jane James acting as systemic coaches/researchers. Judith Hemming, an experienced constellations facilitator with a world-wide reputation in the work, provided expert guidance and inspiration for the project. Terry Ingham provided overall project direction.

This report is compiled and written by Jane James and Terry Ingham, with support from Alison Barclay and Judith Hemming. The Enhancing Children's Learning Project has been a pilot and by any measure a small scale one. What we present, therefore, in this report are insights rather than verifiable claims 'to know'.

The research project involved an initial input to teachers in the form of a short training course to get their inquiry started. In many ways, the actions and activities in the classrooms have been small, but often the simple actions have led to considerable shifts in individuals, both teachers and pupils. In some cases, there has been a noticeable shift in class and whole school communities.

Our sense is that this research is new in its particular field, at least in the UK. More work is required to replicate, develop and further analyse the methods and approaches we describe but we believe there is sufficient evidence of benefit from this pilot study to justify further research and development.

One important measure is that everyone who has been involved in the project is positive about the effects of this work in schools, and are committed to find ways to continue to use and develop it in their own practice and involve other colleagues.

Already the dissemination movement in the county of Wiltshire is growing 'virally'. As teachers see and hear from those who are involved, they too want to find out about the methods. The **nowhere** foundation is currently running a series of four 'twilight' seminars, funded by the Local Education Authority, for another fifteen or so teachers and governors from Wiltshire who were unable to take part in the project. These teachers want to know about the pilot and its findings and how they can incorporate these approaches in to their own classroom practice.

How the report is organised

There are six sections in the report.

Section One states the purpose of and key insights arising from the project.

Section Two provides information about the context of the project. It includes a brief explanation of the practice and theory of systemic work in general and of the constellating process more specifically. Reference is made to the roots of this type of work and its application in families, organisations and schools particularly in Germany and the Netherlands. This section also considers the drive that existed at a local level, which provided a platform for innovation.

Section Three describes how the project was set up and operated, giving an overview of our methods for research, initial training and the support provided by coaches to the individual teacher-researchers as they generated and gathered the data that resulted from their actions.

Section Four provides an evaluation of the project in terms of the intended outcomes as stated in the funding proposal.

Section Five takes the findings a step further by presenting the key themes that are emerging from this work. These themes are placed in the context of the government's new initiative for 'personalised learning'. This is the heart of the report in that it is where the energy for continuation, development and dissemination lies.

Section Six is a brief conclusion to the report. It offers some possible ways forward for wider research, development and dissemination of the work in a sustainable way.

There are five appendices containing supporting detailed information on various aspects of the report including a 'Toolkit' of systemic methods based on the work carried out during this project.

SECTION ONE: PURPOSE, KEY MESSAGES & INSIGHTS

Key question and purpose

The key question of the project is:

‘How can teachers use systemic approaches to enhance children’s learning?’

The purpose of the project was to apply and test in classrooms aspects of a systemic and phenomenological approach, based on constellations, in order to enhance the receptiveness of children to learning.

Specifically the intended outcomes were set out in the proposal as follows:

Behavioural outcomes in the children

Specifically, amongst the children there will be

- A reduction in the number of incidents of anger and conflict
- An increase in positive attitudes to learning
- A greater sense of belonging to the school to support learning
- A greater level of integration between school and family that underpins the learning process

Development outcomes for the teachers

Specifically the participants will

- Develop a wider view of the phenomenological systemic approach to classroom behaviours and learning.
- Develop greater awareness of, and sensitivity to, systemic issues manifesting in classrooms.
- Identify and assess children’s ‘blocks’ to learning
- Apply their knowledge of the systemic approach to the development of learning strategies for children.

How these outcomes were met will be discussed more fully in Section Four of this report.

Key messages and insights

The insights coming out of this study for us are both profound and exciting. We identify the two overarching messages and then offer eight specific insights.

Two overarching messages

Whole system - Systemic approaches, when used by teachers in the classroom, benefit children especially those with barriers to learning. Removing blocks to and enhancing learning often requires some behavioural change which conventional approaches tackle at either a personal (or more accurately intrapersonal) or interpersonal level. This is often dealing with the symptoms of the problem. Without looking to the root causes resolution is only temporary; the issue returns maybe in a different form leaving those involved in a dilemma. Change that sticks comes about through an identification and modification of the web of relationships and interconnections that underlie the

intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics. By tending to 'the space between' as well as the parts the individual in the school community or system can experience a flow in their collective endeavour – in this instance a flow of learning.

Whole self - There is value in helping children and teachers work phenomenologically. Much of education is focussed on cognitive development. The initiative around developing emotional intelligence strengthened the development of affective qualities. It has begun a movement to explore more closely the relationship between 'mind-body'. The two dynamically interacts with, supports and also mirrors each other. Our approach to systemic working opens up to teachers and learners the use of 'the self as instrument'. It asks participants to note not only the thoughts but also feelings and particularly senses that are arising and use them as a source of information about themselves, others and events.

Eight key insights

1 Understanding the needs of the learner – Working systemically enables an understanding of need which goes deeper than gaps in development and into motivational drivers. It helps to create a context in which pupils as well as teachers can actively participate in the continuous process of identifying needs, interests and aptitude for learning. This heightened sensitivity in the children also helps to develop an empathy with the needs of other children making it a mutual process. Teachers also reported an improvement in the quality of relating to their pupils as a result of this deeper knowledge about the learner and through participation in the process making them better facilitators of learning.

2 Enhancing the voice of the learner – A major aspect of understanding needs and being able to express them is equipping the learner with a clear and confident voice to participate in the process. Systemic and phenomenological working provides the learner with a range of 'languages' that goes beyond the verbal and into the spatial and kinaesthetic. These different modes of communication are allied and provide an access to the learners multiple intelligences. A crucial aspect to this process is the ability to face into feelings and situations, and acknowledge them as they are. Often the impact of the acknowledgement alone is sufficient to initiate a necessary shift.

3 Preparing the learner to engage with learning – there is a stage before learning that prepares the individual (and the group) for the immediate task in hand. By overtly attending to settling and raising levels of concentration pupils were more ready to learn. Simple techniques such as 'stilling' (meditating) and identifying 'special people' who could be used to give a sense of support were explored to create an atmosphere of collective responsibility for learning.

4 Enhancing the curriculum – This is not yet another topic to be squeezed into a crowded curriculum; it was used by the teacher-researchers to enhance the existing curriculum. With a subject specific focus, the areas of PHSE and citizenship were the places that received the greatest benefit. But there were also examples of systemic approaches being integrated into subjects such as maths, history and RE. The approach is more about process, allowing the learner to engage and experience more deeply on a sensual as well as cognitive level.

5 Strengthening a sense of belonging – By tending to the class and schools as systems a safe and healthy container was further developed and maintained. The children seemed to develop a greater sense of being held; having a ‘place’ they belonged to, a community. This sense of place needed to be acknowledged and respected and importantly included teaching assistants, teachers and head teachers. The impact of actions of one individual effects the whole system – this was demonstrated graphically through the use of a class mobile – Again it helped to create a ‘corporate’ responsibility amongst the children which was including rather than excluding. The children’s increased sense of connection to others increases their sense of belonging to a community

6 The school at the hub of overlapping systems – One of the difficulties of working in primary schools is their proximity to several other systems and in particular family systems of the children (and teachers) at the school. Children who were experiencing difficulties with learning often had to deal with difficult situations outside of the school, which they brought into the classroom. We feel that this is probably the richest area to explore. By using systemic approaches to identify and resolve some of these difficulties and proactively build home school partnership much can be done to enhance the child’s capacity for learning.

7 Teachers becoming more aware of themselves – Although much of the focus was on developing a sensitivity and awareness in the children to their learning, the teachers’ themselves became acutely aware of their own strengths and issues. They were pivotal part of the systems they were working in. At times they were able to draw insight and support from those who they were working with. At other times they began to face aspects about themselves, their relationships and their practice which required further support. This area around development and support needs exploring further to ensure that teachers are in the best place to work in this way.

8 Co-creative process - The whole project benefited from a collective level of creativity which utilises the various skills and roles of a wide variety of people. There are those involved in the inception of the project, in the training, the design of the classroom sessions, the gathering of the data and the sense making and dissemination processes. Integral to this process is the creative spirit of the children themselves embracing something new. Each phase of the project is an interesting mix of the intended and the emergent – a truly co-creative process. There are lessons here for the design of further work.

SECTION TWO: THE PRACTICES AND THEORIES THAT INFLUENCE AND UNDERPIN THE STUDY

This project is breaking new ground in the UK and, therefore, before we attend to the detail of the project itself, we would like to explain a little about what has influenced and guided the study.

The **nowhere** foundation team comprised two organisational consultants and two psychotherapists. Not surprisingly we were influenced by the leading edge systemic practices in our areas of work. One was in the field of Organisational Development (OD) whilst the other was in the area of Family Systems Therapy. Our insight was they could be successfully applied to managing, teaching and learning in school settings.

The Influence of Organisational Development

Historically, the design and development of the organisations we work and learn in has been dominated for almost a century by Taylor's (1911) mechanistic metaphor. This view is typified by the structuring of organisations into departments on a functional basis connected by the cross cutting systems of finance, information and personnel. People are typically seen as resources who have specific individual accountabilities and performance targets. It is still the dominant model of organising.

Writing in 1999 Slobodnik and Wide saw that most conventional organisational change and development interventions place the focus at the level of task, individual or event. This level of performance, they claim, offers little insight into the underlying structure and dynamics of the relationships that are actually shaping the complex human interactions and result over and over again in 'The Fix that Fails'.

In the past fifteen years, however, an increasing number of practitioners, advisers and writers are embracing the learning from the 'new sciences' and developing new ways to perceive organisations as living system (Senge 1990, Oshry 1996, Zohar, 1997, Jaworski 1998, Wheatley 1999, Capra 2002, Lazlo 2004). Their approach is often referred to as 'Whole Systems Thinking'.

Their work arises from a mix of quantum physics, eastern philosophy and complexity/chaos theory. Rather than focussing on parts and individuals in isolation, a lens is used to identify the underlying patterns and themes that are influencing the culture of the whole organisation. The premise is that the structure of any complex system is made up of the relationships among its various components and subsystems. From this understanding, in organisational and social systems, of equal importance is 'the space between' the components.

Wheatley (1999) describes this playfully as $1 + 1 = 3$ because the '+' itself is an entity which also needs to be considered. When viewing organisations in this way attention needs to be given to 'the flows' through the system of people, money, information and material as well as to employees' goals, performance and emotions. Crucially Slobodnik and Wile argue that within this paradigm to

...change behaviour is to identify and modify this web of relationships and interconnections.

Slobodnik & Wile 1999:2

In their view to work only at an intrapersonal or interpersonal level, will not by itself create sustainable change because people too easily return to old patterns of behaviour, old thoughts, old emotional scars. We sensed this perception could have a major impact on the practices of teaching and learning in schools.

For most systems 'thinkers' the detection of patterns is essentially an intellectual exercise based for example on a diagnosis of language, the relative positions of functions or observations of behaviours. There has been an interesting development in the recent work of Senge and Scharmer (2001) and Scharmer (2003) in their work with organisations and social systems that takes working systemically to another level of practice. They have begun to integrate the use of somatics or 'body based awareness' into systemic ways of working drawing on both 'sensing' and 'seeing' (rather than thinking alone) as a way of accessing knowledge phenomenologically. They are developing an approach that uses conscious experience in all of its varieties as a source of data to study the affect of systems on human action - as they are.

Cotter (1999) offers an important underpin to this approach in her explanation of bioenergetics. She sees 'body awareness' as a build on the Reichian notion that people manifest in the world in two dimensions, the body and the mind and that the two are intimately connected in a way that make them inseparable.

The Strozzi Institute 2002 makes an interesting link between learning and 'somatics' which acknowledges the many unique aspects that make up a person's character and resilience.

"The word Somatics comes from the Greek word 'Soma', which translates as 'the living body in its wholeness: the mind, the body, and the spirit as a unity'. It is more than working on the body, or including the body as an aspect of learning. It goes beyond attending to the body as a place to manage moods and comprises more than experiential learning. The use of Somatics as a coaching tool incorporates the knowledge of historical experience, the wisdom of recurrent practice, and the power of learning new skills and interpretations."

Strozzi Institute 2002 Embodying Your Leadership Potential

The extension to the dimensions of human perception in this way is a major departure from the confines of current humanistic organisational psychological theory (McGergor, 1960, McClelland and Boyatzis, 1982, Mintzberg, 1989, Argyris, 1990). Although much more research needs to be done for us to understand fully how this phenomenological approach works it appears to open up new avenues for affecting change at both personal and human systems levels. For us this body-mind dynamic brings together the notion of working with the 'whole person integrated into whole system'

In parallel to these developments in OD has been an equally radical development in a branch of psychotherapy called family systems therapy, and in particular the process called Constellations. The importance of this influence on the shape of the pilot is briefly explained below.

The Influence of Family Systems Therapy

The work of a German family systems therapist/philosopher called Bert Hellinger (1998, 1999) during the late seventies and early eighties is central to this project. He is less well known in Britain than in mainland Europe, where his influence in the field of psychology is considerable. He began the development of a systemic/phenomenological approach called Constellations applying it to the resolution of problems in families that 'individual-focussed' approaches were unable to tackle. (Appendix One gives his definition of a phenomenological approach)

His work draws on the earlier practices of Jacob Moreno (1957, 1987), the originator of psychodrama and Virginia Satir (1967), who introduced family sculpture, or reconstructions to psychotherapy. Theoretically, Hellinger's (1998) insights are underpinned by the thought and research of Ivan Boszormeni-Nagy (1973, 1986) who highlighted the power of intergenerational bonds and the hidden loyalties they created in families. Like Gregory Bateson (1972) before him, he made connections between family and systemic processes and individual disturbances.

After decades of an emphasis on seeing individuals as the source of health or sickness, there has been a renewed welcome for the other polarity, that of seeing each individual as a component of a system, where the unit of treatment is the whole set of relationships in which the individual is embedded. (Haley 1977). In this approach, the emphasis is on reconciliation and on a historical focus where all are seen as in some way 'victims of their time and place' rather than as autonomous actors (Massing, 1994). It is a solution focused approach, drawing also on the work of Milton Erickson (1954), Steve de Shazer (1985), and others in the field of brief solution focused therapy.

These systems therapists see the complex networks of systems as non linear (Forrester 1972) and therefore difficult to modify by the verbal (digital) ways in which we usually represent reality. They prefer as more appropriate an analogic, non verbal approach in which relationships can be seen as a single unity, and can be choreographed, much as a dance might be (Duhl et al 1973).

Hellinger's work extends the depth and application of these thinkers and practitioners, demonstrating how we are all part of larger units that have something like a 'soul' that encompasses all the members of family and social group. From this perspective it makes no sense to imagine that people simply live self-determined lives.

Hellinger also emphasises, as do his predecessors, the importance of every single person in a system. If anyone is forgotten or excluded they leave a 'hole' which is felt by all and which is championed unknowingly by a later member of that system whose fate becomes identified with the missing member(s). When missing people are brought back into a constellation, 'all the members feel relief' (Schweitzer and Weber 1982).

More recently the constellating approach (*see Appendix Two for a fuller explanation*) has been developed for managing and consulting to organisations – commercial and public/voluntary sector - as well as for larger human systems such as the reconciliation movement in South Africa, the plight of Native Americans, and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Only a small amount of work has been done in school situations mostly in Germany and The Netherlands – and that only recently. We were keen to explore the approach further in the UK.

Local Influences

At a local level, our inspiration comes from two sources. One is the head teachers, teachers and educational consultants who have begun training and working with constellations in the UK for the past three years. The second is the work of Marianne Franke-Gricksch, (2003) working in Germany as well as others in Europe and as far a field as Mexico. Each group have been exploring and documenting the way that these methodologies can be adapted for young people, even of primary school age.

Franke-Gricksch's work (2003) showed the approach can help children, especially those who have strong loyalties to the values of their family and home culture which are different to those of school. This is a vital consideration, since so many initiatives to raise educational standards founder in whole or part because children remain loyal to the level of achievement of their parents, even when their families encourage their children to surpass them. Perhaps this is one reason for 'the 20%' whose learning is blocked and who are seemingly impervious to conventional methods of support. Franke-Gricksch's work demonstrates that the approach could promote in children a strong motivation to learn as a result of feeling more relaxed and secure in their place in the world.

Closer to home in the UK, the seeds for the study were sown during an earlier research project run by the **nowhere** foundation called 'The Schools We Need'. One seed related to the value of helping children to learn to see patterns in their own behaviour, developing their own 'systemic eye'. A head teacher involved in that project wrote,

I am sure that there are very real possibilities for the use of this approach in order to develop the children's awareness of order, pattern and relationship within their lives.

Val Culff, June 2003

Two other head teachers participating in the same research commented on the potential of helping children with social and life skills. One head teacher used an exercise to help children at her school who were quarrelling by reconnecting them to their bigger history when they were strong friends.

Together these influences provided the impetus for a small group of people to begin to shape their ideas and seek a source of funding for their inquiry.

SECTION THREE: THE PROJECT - WHAT WE DID

Initial Preparation

Working with both the insights about systemic applications and the presenting need, we outlined our thoughts in a proposal and applied to the DfES in January 2004 for funding (*see Appendix 3 for an abbreviated version*). On acceptance in February our first step was to form a steering group to guide and support the project.

It was chaired by Terry Ingham the managing director of the **nowhere** foundation. Two head teachers, who had spearheaded the request for this work to be taken into the classroom, played a major part. One took part directly in the research; the other worked with a wider brief to develop the initiative in other ways. Other key figures were the systemic coaches cum researchers Alison Barclay and Jane James. Wiltshire Local Education Authority supported the project through an advisor Tom Robson whose particular role was to advise on the local seminar at the end of the project for dissemination of findings and ideas.

The steering group was brought together formally for a meeting at the start of the project once funding had been obtained to agree the objectives and details of implementation. The group then supported the meaning making process alongside the participants at the halfway stage. And finally it agreed to 'sign off' the work at a locally based seminar in Wiltshire.

Design and planning of the project

Designing the research methodology

The research methodology we used was a form of collaborative action inquiry. It used elements of the approaches developed by McNiff 2003, Heron 1996, Reason and Bradbury 2001 and Senge and Scharmer 2001.

The three specific aspects deployed within the methodology were gathering data phenomenologically, dialogue and action research. Using each teacher's chosen focus or issue, the mix of the three methods enabled insights to be generated that drew on invisible realities through subtle shifts in consciousness, meaning making through conversation and observable phenomenon through the enactment of possible solutions.

One change we made from the proposed methodology was that we didn't establish an initial baseline against which to measure outcomes. We felt that given the size of the sample, the length of the inquiry and the subtlety and depth of some of the issues the teacher-researchers were working with it was an aspect of measurement that wouldn't be useful and could actually constrain creativity.

We decided we would interrogate the data for indications of progress in the knowledge that more specific research would need to be carried out in due course.

Design of the tools and training

The design of the tools and training were led by Judith Hemming and were crucial to the success of the whole project. (*See Appendix 4 for an outline of the course*). A special acknowledgement should be made here to the initial work of Marianne Franke-Gricksch's work in Bavarian schools in developing simple systemic and phenomenological exercises.

The training developed the skills of the teachers to a level where they could take action in the classroom. It also provided a space to 'trial' the tools and exercises for the first time. The exercises were designed so that teachers were able to bring their own creativity to shape application in detail. Each teacher would later develop and refine them to suit their specific situations and in ways that they felt comfortable with when taking actions in classrooms and assemblies.

Recruitment of participants

Participants for the project were recruited by contacting all the schools in the Warminster primary cluster group where the main interest had been generated. Twelve teachers including heads, classroom teachers and teaching assistants were originally recruited to the twelve available places. We also tried to operate a contingency back up list of individuals who wanted to take part. In the event, although some people did drop out of the training they did so at such a late stage that it was impossible to release those from the back up contingency list to replace them.

Participants

The final list of participants was:

- Val Culff, head teacher, and Janet Aylesbury, TA, from Crockerton CE Primary
- Caroline Evans, teacher from St Johns CE Primary, Warminster
- Lesley Golledge, teacher, and Jane Garrett, TA, from Minster CE Primary, Warminster
- Joss Jewell, head teacher, Chapmanslade CE Primary
- Roli Noyce and Alison Mills, teachers from Princecroft Primary, Warminster
- Debi Downing, head teacher, and Sue Bray, TA, Codford CE Primary

Non participants and drop outs

Two head teachers who had originally expressed keen interest in being part of the project were unable to take part. One was unable to attend the two-day training course because her school was already committed to a whole school 'culture week' and remained as part of the steering group,. Another head dropped out at the very last minute due to pressure of work. These cases seem to represent something about the school system itself – one that is characterised by lack of time generally, by a pressure on heads especially to try to fit in more than is physically possible.

As coach-researchers we have been struck by the difficulty head teachers often have in sticking to time boundaries, for example – turning up for meetings late, often with totally justifiable reasons of urgent priorities. However, this element of pressure on time will affect children, teachers and parents and others in their 'systems'.

Ethical considerations

The steering group discussed ethical issues arising from the planned research. The efficacy of informing parents of the nature of the work to be undertaken was fully explored. It was agreed finally to leave the decision about involving or informing parents with individual schools and to the discretion of the head in consultation with other staff participating in the project. There was a reminder to coach-researchers that the use of photographs and videos would be subject to individual school policies on such matters. The need for protecting the identity of individual children and respecting the views and rights of children and families was heavily emphasised.

Running the project

Developing skills, knowledge and ideas

A residential training event took place at Ammerdown, Somerset on March 24th and 25th 2004. The ten participating heads, teachers and teaching assistants (TA) involved themselves fully in the activities of the two days.

Essentially this was a very brief input of training – some of the participants had experienced constellations before – some had not. The focus was on phenomenological awareness, some of the key ordering forces at work in school and family systems and some very practical ideas of how the project could be taken forward in individual schools

Participants went away from the two days with a number of possible ideas as to where they might focus their attention in their classroom and whole school situations. The coaches committed themselves to visiting each school to give support to the development of the ideas.

Planning for action

Participants devised particular projects appropriate to the children and the classroom context. In some cases participants worked in pairs – especially where TAs had come accompanying teachers or a head - in others teachers worked individually.

Crockerton CE Primary School, Val Culff and Janet Aylesbury

At Crockerton, the head and a TA worked with a group of year 5 children in which girls outnumbered boys by a ratio of 3:1. The sessions were timetabled on a weekly basis and were 'special'. The head was not the class teacher of these children. The TA however was used to working with the class. There was a particular focus on 'respect' and a plan to tie in the work of the group with whole school assemblies also on the theme of respect.

St Johns CE School, Warminster, Caroline Evans

Caroline has recently changed from secondary art teaching to primary. This project took place during her second year at the school and she was the only member of staff from her school on the project. Her class was year 2 and 3 children. Her plan was to strengthen the link between family and school through a variety of approaches and very much integrated with other aspects of the curriculum

Minster Primary School, Lesley Golledge and Jane Garrett

The class teacher of the Year 6 class worked with the TA who was assigned mainly to that same class. Their systemically focused sessions began after SATS and the class residential trip and was aimed at giving children a greater understanding of the systems of which they are a part especially families.

Chapmanslade, Joss Jewell

The head is a teaching head but chose to work with children older than her own class. She withdrew all the Year 6 children for a total of five sessions to work on the transition to secondary school – building confidence and aiming to decrease anxiety through consideration of a number of coping strategies

All the children but one were moving to the large comprehensive in Warminster. The secondary school itself is focusing on the transfer of children into year 7. During the course of the summer term of 2004 the school produced a Transition Consultation Paper with the aim of ensuring smooth transition between Years 6 and 7. The consultation paper lists the intervention and support programme content as:

- Self-esteem identifying strengths, others' positive attributes and strategies to raise self esteem
- Anger management: coping strategies to control anger and conflict
- Relationships: understanding and exploring how friendships work, including compromise, jealousy, needs of different people

It would appear that Joss's project indicated prescient and fortuitous alignment with the aims of the comprehensive school. She met the group of year 6 children on a weekly basis once the end of key stage assessments were over. The aims of her project were for the children to

- To understand how they can use different ways of thinking to support their learning
- To leave Primary School with an increased confidence in their future
- To learn more about themselves and their place in systems

Princecroft Primary School, Roli Noyce

Roli taught a mixed class of year 5 and Year 6. He wanted to explore ideas of support for the year 6 children as they approached and practised for SATS and also to consider strategies for allowing children to release themselves from the stresses of home as they arrive at school to learn. He also constructed and used a class mobile as an explicit symbol for class social dynamics.

Princecroft Primary School, Warminster, Alison Mills

Alison, class teacher to a mixed class of years 3 and 4 chose to integrate systemic approaches with other aspects of the curriculum – particularly history and PHSE. She also prepared children for working phenomenologically by using a number of body work and empathy exercises.

Action

The teachers largely made their own decisions about how and when to undertake the systemic work in their classrooms and schools. Each project was different though as this report shows, there are many similarities in effect and benefit which emerged from the actions and activities. The systemic coaches gave support, guidance and advice to the teachers as they implemented their plans in the classroom. Coaches were available for consultation and advice on the telephone and by email as well as through visits to the classrooms to support, observe and give feedback. The teachers and coaches recorded observations and reflections as data for the research. The coaches were themselves supported both by peer supervision and by supervision from Judith Hemming.

Reflection

There was a further meeting after the initial training for the participating teachers, which took place in May for an afternoon. This coming together enabled individuals to share their experience with each other and to build on ideas or practices developing in the classroom or in group work. This opportunity was clearly valued by those who were able to attend – they remarked on how much there seemed to be to learn and sharing experience was extremely helpful.

Finally, a ‘meaning-making’ twilight session was held at the end of the summer term for all the participants and the steering group and coaches. This session was very rich in terms of enabling further synthesised data to be gathered as teachers reflected on the overall experience of the project and the effect they believed it had had on children and on themselves.

Concluding

Teachers submitted their notes and other research data to the coaches for full analysis and to allow the outcomes and results to be both written up and disseminated to the wider educational community. The phase of the research became very fruitful indeed as it became clear that the emerging themes drew from many parts of the project and the richness of the teachers’ data enabled the findings to be so powerfully illustrated.

As the results of the project began to be written up, the process was aided hugely by the input of educationalists and specialists interested in the work. In particular, Jane Reed from the Institute of Education gave valuable comment and astute analytical advice about the draft text of the report and Robert Smith of Stanton Marris able to help situate the research in the wider field of educational policy and new initiatives. Sarah Fletcher of teacherresearcher.net has been able to provide valuable advice about dissemination of the research across the educational network

SECTION FOUR: EVALUATION AGAINST THE PROJECT OBJECTIVES – HOW SUCCESSFUL HAVE WE BEEN?

In this section we will detail some of the findings to show the extent to which the specific objectives were met. This is not the whole story. The data stimulated in us insights which have enabled us to go beyond the parameters set by the objectives. Section Four is, therefore, a brief consideration of the objectives using one or two examples from the data that has been generated. We use Section Five to go into greater detail using further examples from the data and to outline a number of emergent themes which point to possible future directions for this work in the educational sector.

The intended outcomes of the project were detailed in the proposal and fully shared with the steering group, participating schools and Maureen Burns, a director in the Innovation Unit at the DfES. The main beneficiaries were anticipated to be the children themselves in terms of an improved readiness to learn.

Children manifesting difficult behaviours or attitude were anticipated to benefit more from the work, which would increase their levels of respect, sense of belonging and ability to balance give and take in their 'transactions' with both teachers and peers.

As a pilot project run over a short period of time, objectives were stated in terms of behavioural and attitude shift.

Specifically the intended behavioural outcomes for children were detailed as being

- A reduction in the number of incidents of anger and conflict
- An increase in positive attitudes to learning
- A greater sense of belonging to the school
- A greater level of integration between school and family

The second set of anticipated outcomes related to the teachers taking part in the project. It was reasonably expected that they would benefit by developing new perspectives through the application of new approaches with children.

Specifically the proposal focused on the following expected development outcomes for participating teachers:

- Development of a wider view of the phenomenological systemic approach to classroom behaviours and learning
- Development of a greater awareness of, and sensitivity to, systemic issues manifesting in classrooms
- Improved identification and assessment of children's 'blocks' to learning
- Application of knowledge of the systemic approach to the development of learning strategies for children.

Finally, we expected the project at some level to be of benefit to the wider systems involved - the schools themselves, and the families they serve whilst realising that this aspect would be far more difficult to assess within the scope of the pilot.

Outcomes for children

There is undoubted evidence from the research data that children benefited from the systemic approaches. In many cases the benefit is demonstrated by children testifying to understanding themselves and others. Also the pupils acknowledged that they had learnt how to deal with their feelings more effectively. We are confident that a claim can be made to link between this better management of themselves, their relationships and emotions and an improved receptiveness to learning. The participating teachers are clear that the effects of using the approaches they applied within the classroom are almost entirely positive. The best indication of this is the fact that, without exception, all participating teachers are committed to continuing use of the techniques and methods in their teaching and classroom practice beyond the remit of the project and the research.

I can't wait to continue with this class in September – see how they nurture twelve new children into their 'systems'

I really feel that the sessions have made a difference to the children's attitudes . . . I fully intend to repeat the sessions next year.

I am sure that next year, as Year 6; these children will benefit from these sessions and be a closer group. We are hoping to work on next year's Year 5 in a similar way.

This kind of work is not just a good idea – it's essential.

Through a variety of different techniques and approaches in the classroom or in working with groups of children, the participating teachers have enabled children to know themselves and their situations, feelings and responses better. In addition, children have been helped to understand and accept aspects of their situations that cannot be changed. They have given voice to truths and found greater ease through doing so.

It has allowed children to be truthful with themselves and to know that it's 'OK' to feel like they do

Reduction in incidents of anger and conflict

Several teachers report through their research data logs reduction in conflict and incidents of anger and argument. Some of the work, which enables children to experience and explore the nature of empathy, seems to lead to greater understanding of each other's moods or difficulties. Playground or classroom responses based on defensiveness and aggression as a deflector of painful feelings or of mirroring those feelings in another – seemed to be reduced.

I have noticed that they respect each other more at playtime -not as many arguments. They are also more respectful of the MDSAs

Joss Jewell

If I respect people I know they will respect me so I treat them how I want to be treated. So if I'm sad I can count on them to come over and say or ask me what is the matter. It's made me feel different about how I should treat them

Yr 6 pupil

In Crockerton School there was also a remarkable reduction of playground incidents noted after the first systemic session – for the first time ever during a week of playtimes there were no incidents reported by the MDSAs. As Janet recorded in her notes:

Everybody is just doing what they should be doing!

Teachers have reported an increased sense amongst children of wanting to include rather than exclude and an increasing awareness of how others might feel.

As Systemic coach/researchers we observed that the work has a bonding effect on the groups of children increasing the respect they show each other and their teachers and other adults in the school community. There has been an increase in trust as children learn more about each other's lives.

Increase in positive attitudes to learning

We can engage in reasonable speculation that if children feel generally happier about their family and friendship situations, or are testifying to being less worried about the transfer to Year 7 of the local large comprehensive school for example – that their ability to concentrate and learn will be better than if these systemic interventions had not been made.

One teacher did undertake a form of experiment – in full consultation with the children. Year 6 pupils who were preparing for SATS did one Maths test without carrying their special pictures and one Maths test when they had their pictures with them. The majority performed better when they had the symbol of support with them.

One child did not. On further discussion, it emerged that the child had chosen his father as his 'special supportive person' but the father, in the teacher's opinion is very over-demanding of the boy and this may have affected the result. As researchers we are aware that the wording to be used by teachers in relation to the 'special person' is important. It may well be that for other reasons this boy wanted or needed to have his father 'close' to him.

Val and Janet's project was with children that had another class teacher. After the first systemic session she reported that they performed better in their mental Maths test (having been talking about eliciting support from family/special person. Class teacher at the same time reported unusually sensitive comments about the boy chosen to be pupil of the week.

Greater sense of belonging

The various classroom activities and discussions which took place as part of this project seem, without doubt, to have increased children's sense of belonging, both to the class or group community, and to the school as well as to their own family systems. After discussing with children the types of people who are there to help them in school and out of school, the teacher noted:

The children were excited by the realisation that there is such a wide network of support for them both inside and outside school

The head teacher who worked with the Year 6 children preparing them for moving on to secondary school spent the final session of the summer term considering the heritage and history of the small village school that they were about to leave. The teacher provided pictures of children at the school over a hundred years earlier. The response from the children was powerful – some of them said it made them feel stronger knowing they were part of a process of which so many other children had been a part. One boy said he felt like a very small fish in a very big sea, (possibly very helpfully as he anticipated moving to Year 7 in a very large school). Another child wrote:

I have never thought about how many people have been to this school and how many teachers have worked in this school. This has made me feel stronger. I think you should do this with next year's year 6 so they feel comfortable with moving on. It has helped me.

A greater level of integration between school and family

Given the relatively short time frame of this pilot project, the depth of evidence we are able to offer of a greater level of integration between school and family is not as great as it would have been if the pilot had run over two or three school terms. Undoubtedly, for some children – often those with the greatest complexity of domestic and relational backgrounds – this pilot offered an opportunity for recognition and acknowledgement within school of the nature and effect of some of those problematic circumstances. There was some data indicating that children were transferring some of their increased expression of emotion and need back to the family. One ten year old child told one of the researchers after a session discussing families that she wanted very much to talk to her mother about her (the child's) desire to see her father who lived in America. She understood the difficulty for the mother in finding the money for the trip but also spoke of being able to envisage saving up to visit her father on her own when she was older.

Another child after the same class family discussion had written a letter about the difficulty she had with knowing that her father had physically abused her mother when she was pregnant with the girl's younger brother. After a discussion, she was able to articulate that her father was sorry for the abuse (the parents are apart now) and she was able to acknowledge admiration for her mother who had protected the baby in the womb despite the aggression from the father.

Outcomes for teachers

Development of a wider view of the phenomenological systemic approach to classroom behaviours and learning

The measure of meeting this objective lies in the recognition that the approach offered something different to the teacher-researchers existing ways of working, and that they were able to see the use of the approach to changing behaviours. In terms of recognition Caroline commented

I feel like I've been involved in something very special, which touches the very souls of children. Because the work involves recognising truths, the way things really are, it seems to strip away the 'façade' behind which most of us hide. It has given me a chance to look at the 'real' child together with the 'baggage' which they bring to school.

Whilst Janet said

I have really enjoyed being a part of the programme and feel I have already learnt such a lot. I feel honoured to be allowed into the children's thoughts and worries. Their trust in me makes me feel very special.

These words were written at the end of the action phase of the pilot. One is a teacher, the other a teaching assistant. Both allude to the positive impact that they have observed systemic work to have on children and also infer to the special nature of the opportunity given to them by the project to experience improved practice in the classroom.

The pilot provided an opportunity for the teachers to unfold some of the possibilities of phenomenological and systemic approaches in the primary classroom. The training equipped them with knowledge and skills sufficient for them to experiment in their school settings. What surprised the systemic coach-researchers was how far they were able to integrate the ideas into the curriculum and, in writing in October, how they have further refined the work with the new intake. We take this as indication of the participants had developed a wider view of this type of work.

Development of a greater awareness of, and sensitivity to, systemic issues manifesting in classrooms

Here we were looking at the teacher's sensitivity to children's and as well as their own issues. We pick up on both of these points in more depth in Section Five.

Lesley sums up the shift for her succinctly when she describes in her log.

...that baggage that can be a problem for children and for all of us. It has been a wonderful vehicle for allowing children to understand and sympathise with other's discomfort, others problems. I suppose most important it has allowed children to be truthful with themselves and know that it is OK to feel like they do. It's perhaps an opportunity for us as teachers to try to help with these problems in some way, even if it only by recognising.

One of the features of this systemic work in classrooms is that it seems to allow very important things to be surfaced that are often not addressed, for example, the acknowledgement of the importance of the children to each other as part of the class cohort leave for another class. (This happens frequently in these small primaries as year groups are combined to make resource-effective class groups).

During the project one of the participating head teachers experienced the unexpected death of her father. The nature of the work allowed the head to both share some of her

feelings of loss and sadness with the children and for them to offer her sympathy and support.

She wrote at the end of the project:

*Children are just miniature versions of us.
Because they are smaller
We assume they have smaller thoughts
Smaller worries
Smaller sadnesses.
Robyn lost her father before I did in death.
She could comfort me.
Many know of the pain of divorced and separated parents
A pain I cannot begin to understand
And some know the confusion
When those they love, hurt them.*

*How often in our crowded days together
Do we let the children talk?
How often do we turn to them
For wisdom, comfort shared sadnesses?
How often do we build a safe place and time
When we can all be equal
And acknowledge our sameness
Looking for truths and ways to find a path?*

Improved identification and assessment of children's blocks to learning

This is about understanding of need – both by the teacher and by the child herself. The subtleties of these findings have been quite surprising – educationalists will often focus on development needs but our findings indicate that there is a level of need below these which can harbour many blocks to learning.

*I think it is increasingly important today with all the emphasis on brain-based learning to understand that many of these problems are barriers to learning and if we can tap in and help them we can facilitate learning. Aid self-esteem etc.
Lesley Golledge*

One teacher of year six children was amazed at the details that emerged about children's families and their home and domestic circumstances once the topic of 'families' was raised in one of the systemic sessions. She said she wished she had known all these things about the children at the start of the year. It would have helped her to understand some of the difficulties individuals were having with concentrating on work in the classroom – would have better understood their blocks to learning.

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 to Cornwall – 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 ‘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 in to the hall to hear her. She saw him and turned to her teacher 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.

Application of knowledge of the systemic approach to the development of learning strategies for children.

Teachers’ responses to their experience of the work they carried out seems to demonstrate their developing confidence in the application of systemic approaches in devising learning strategies for children. They were particularly adept in synthesising systemic approaches within other curriculum areas – not only with PHSE but also for example with art, history and citizenship.

The children need to understand about respect if we are to create a more harmonious society for the future. A lot of the things we have been trying at school in this project fit in beautifully with other initiatives and are helping to shape our school improvement plans: learning to learn, the learning environment, the vibrant school project, citizenship work on sustainability and the future, and global education. All these tie in together perfectly and make it easy for children to see the connections as well. All these are about a better future and it is crucial that children know what needs to be looked at to create it.

Roli Noyce

Through applying concepts such as 'quiet time' perhaps marked by calm music or contemplative meditation with eyes closed – teachers have found ways of bringing children to learning with increased readiness and ability to concentrate.

One teacher at the end of the project proposed the view that what she had been able to do was allow children to be more in charge of their own learning strategies – finding awareness of what might get in the way for them as individuals and practising ways of dealing with unhelpful blocks or anxieties.

Finally, we expected the project at some level to be of benefit to the wider systems involved - the schools themselves, and the families they serve. Certainly as we met the participating teachers at the end of the first three weeks of the new school year – most seemed positive about their role. In some cases, individuals explicitly shared a renewed sense of purpose and calmer commitment to the children they are now teaching. Some were delighted for the systemic word to be spreading through the seminar series with the inclusion of governors and other teachers and heads in the consideration of systemic classroom methods.

SECTION FIVE – EMERGING THEMES/DEEPER INSIGHTS

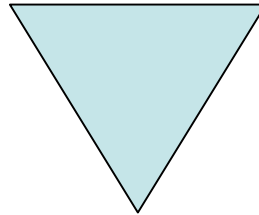
The themes arising from this study can be helpfully clustered into three main areas shown diagrammatically below.

The Individual Learner

- Teachers understanding of the child's needs
- Children understanding their own & other's needs
- Creating a stronger voice
- A readiness to learn

The Provision of Learning

- Integrating systemic approaches into the curriculum
- Co-creating learning experiences



The Environment for Learning

- Developing a class/school community
- Connecting with other systems
- Teachers' awareness of themselves

There are findings that focus on **the individual learner** – on ways of helping teachers to understand the needs of their pupils more fully and importantly of increasing the pupils' awareness of their own needs. Then we explore ways that enable pupils to articulate and give voice to their needs in perhaps new and different ways. Finally we consider some strategies which help to prepare them for a stronger engagement in learning activity. In all instances we can see how a systemic approach can build on and refine a number of existing strategies that are already being used to good effect by teachers.

School and educational communities place currently place a strong emphasis on **the provision of learning experience** through pedagogic method and curriculum frameworks. Our study points to how systemic approaches can both enhance and complement current national curriculum frameworks and provision. Further, we suggest that these methods can contribute to the growing development of, and interest in, the co-creation of learning strategies – where adults both within and attached to the school community can engage with pupils and students to co-create learning experience.

Perhaps most exciting is the impact on the context or the **environment for learning**. Not surprisingly when 'seeing' systems participants' perspectives are opened to a wider and more holistic picture. The findings indicate numerous benefits to the learning process in working to create harmonious and cohesive class and school communities. It is an obvious statement to make but the strength of evidence in this area coupled with the speed and simplicity by which it was achieved, demands attention.

1. The Individual Learner

In this category we will look at the issues and ideas emerging from the findings as they affect the learner as an individual. An obvious place to begin is with a consideration of how the teacher can deepen their understanding of children's needs. Less obvious is the role that children themselves have to play in that process. So the second part of this section on the individual learner, 'explores ways that children have heightened their awareness of their own needs and requirements.

Being aware of need, though useful, is not sufficient in itself. We explore, therefore, how pupils can develop and use their voice to communicate and participate in their own development.

The final part of this section considers approaches that help teachers to create an atmosphere conducive to learning and prepare children to engage better with the learning process.

1.1 Teachers' awareness of the learners' needs

A good starting point in the provision of any service is to understand need and then shape provision accordingly. In an educational context the focus on need is usually on the individual's development needs through the conduct of a gap analysis. This involves understanding the requirements of the particular curriculum-based competency, identifying the current level of competence of the learner and assessing the need in terms of their gap in skill or knowledge. It is a well developed and practiced approach.

The systemic approach, whilst not offering a great deal directly to the development needs process, does enable teachers to go deeper under the surface and understand better the forces affecting the pupil's motivation to learn. The importance of this knowledge is especially significant when trying to deal with the minority of learners who have intractable blocks to learning.

As researchers we were surprised by the extent to which the study enabled teachers to find out important details of the lives of the children in their school which they had not known previously. This 'revealing' nearly always led to greater understanding and a more empathetic approach to the learner.

I feel like I've been involved in something very special that touches the very souls of children. Because the work involves recognising truths, the way things really are, it seems to strip away the façade behind which most of us hide. It has given me a chance to look at the real child together with the 'baggage' which they carry to school.

Lesley Gollidge

Another teacher stated that if she had known at the start of the year what she subsequently found out through this work, she would have been much more understanding of some children's behaviour and lack of ability sometimes to concentrate and perform at school.

Most teachers cited instances of where a better understanding led to them working more sensitively with need. CE had noticed that M a bright child who whilst excelling often lacked confidence and was often miserable. Her resulting behaviour was causing significant problems. During the project she focussed on M to help her resolve the difficulties she was experiencing.

Over the first 4 weeks the roller-coaster of emotions ran was running its usual course. An entry in week four describes M's continuing unhappiness – *often tearful...feels alone and needs to find another [friend].*

Then in week five M had the chance to set up her family as a 'home network map' which showed pets in the centre close to mum, her father further away and no mention of her brother.

In week six Caroline writes:

Very concerned about M – she was upset with the music teacher and said to her 'There's something wrong in my family'. When I talked to M she was upset about pets not people. M's home network did have more pets than people which concerned me. Her dog ran away five months ago and her hamster died years ago. M seems to be forever trying to fill a gap – missing a friend that had moved – pets she has lost. She is desperate for something. All she is able to be is miserable much of the time – and when something miserable happens she is overloaded and in the depths of despair.

Her teacher had realised that there was always a 'gap' for M – something missing. This enabled her to devise a number of strategies to fill the gap. Caroline discussed the feelings she had for her own dog with M; the class shared and supported M with her issues; M experienced possessing things such as the class toy dog and then consciously to 'let go' 'to build recognition that it would still be there for her another day'.

Such stories never really end but progress was being made. Caroline's final entry in reference to having to give the toy dog back at an appropriate time reads:

She was a little upset – but there was recognition in her eyes . . .

In getting to know the children in this way the quality of the relationship between teacher and pupil improves noticeably often creating a virtuous spiral. This is captured in a simple statement made by the two teaching assistants.

I feel honoured to be allowed into the children's thoughts and worries. Their trust in me makes me feel very special.

Jane Garrett

And another said that she

realised that I like the children now. It wasn't like this before. I know them and they know me and that makes all the difference.

Janet Aylesbury

Many of the teachers were determined to find out more about the children's families 'from the start' of the new term - and our continuing contact with the teachers shows this is happening.

1.2 Learners understanding their own needs and others needs

If it is beneficial for a teacher to get a good understanding of the learner's needs and interests then of equal importance was to ask, How can we develop the ability of the children to know themselves and others better? Together the two elements foster a healthy interaction amongst teachers and pupils. This was particularly important for those children whom teachers had identified as 'fragile learners'.

A good deal of work has been done in many of the Wiltshire schools using 'emotional literacy' – (see the web-site of Emotional Living and Learning in Wiltshire www.wellwilts/info) which the systemic approach builds on in direct and practical ways. It developed in the children a greater self-awareness enabling them to know and recognise their emotions as they happen and in some cases start a healing process. As a result they were better able to manage their own emotions and also support others. Caroline's note at end of pilot on two of her 'focus' children below illustrate this

Kyle is becoming more aware of his struggle to manage his emotions

Joshua is showing more and more of his compassionate side and brilliantly he knows it

We developed exercises that would allow children to acknowledge, better understand and increase their capacity to deal with their own needs, behaviours, interactions and feelings including anxiety, sadness, anger or excitement and happiness.

One simple example is from a teacher who initiated activities to enable children to convey feelings without speaking. This involved individual children displaying a feeling which they had written on a piece of paper to another child sitting on a chair. Alison asked a girl who had difficulty with a particular boy to 'represent', 'I want to be your

friend'. When she did this – conveying this feeling without speaking to the boy – he spontaneously rose from his chair and put his arms round her.

In another example, the teacher of a year 6 class divided the children in different ways so they could experience different groupings. For example, those who have been at school since reception and those who have joined the school since then; those who have siblings as distinct from those who are only children; those who have been abroad for holidays and those who haven't and so on. The teacher writes in her log:

At each stage I asked children how they felt in that particular group. The physical act of separation seemed to have an immediate effect and they were quick to respond that they felt left out, different, sad, jealous, rejected, embarrassed separated from friends and so on

Lesley Golledge

A final example is where every child in the class made a 'feelings thermometer' with a peg to register feelings on a colour calibrated strip.

Pupils were enthusiastic in remembering ways of dealing with feelings and eager to offer examples of how our different strategies had helped them i.e. using the problem bin in conjunction with the wish box i.e. turning a negative into a positive.

I asked the children to close their eyes and think for a moment about recent feelings – they readily generated vocabulary in relation to their most recent feelings and experiences. The class listened to happy and unhappy scenarios and confidently clipped their pegs onto the class thermometer to describe visually how they felt. I was surprised that not one child was nervous or even reluctant to do this. As expected some pegs were placed in typical places, some were put in what some children thought to be surprising. The discussion that followed was incredibly valuable...

It became clear that by accessing the thermometer as a group in the safe set up of the circle, pupils were able to gauge and begin to tap into a range of feelings that they had. Also a natural open-mindedness and tolerance was being born or perhaps nurtured in each individual as each response was handled honestly, sensitively and accepted as normal.

Caroline Evans

In two schools some interesting gender issues surfaced regarding the different ways that boys and girls view and deal with things and this was valuable for both sexes to appreciate. In particular, they realised that there can be differences in expression of feeling which do not necessarily indicate strength of feeling.

We tried to 'tease out' how people respond differently. Also how some girls were crying for themselves and others for their friends who were upset. One of the boys said that he 'cries inside' He said he thought most boys did this.

Val Cuff

Central to the purpose of this is the quality of self-motivation which, to paraphrase Goleman (1995), means having the ability to marshal emotions in the service of a goal. Emotional self-control – delaying gratification and stifling impulsiveness underlies accomplishments of every sort. In this instance the self-motivation exhibited by many of the pupils showed evidence of enhancing their ability to learn – even when the support was minimal.

A good example of this is where teachers used the new approach to help the pupils manage their fears they had about making the transition from primary to secondary school.

In Chapmanslade School, the group of year 6 children surfaced and expressed their worries and concerns about transition in a number of ways. They used post-its placed according to severity of the worry; they wrote about their feelings knowing that the writing would be shared with others; and they also had the opportunity to write in private notebooks which were not looked at by anyone and were finally destroyed with the permission of the children.

They became very aware about how each other felt, very conscious. When they went for a visit to the secondary school, they didn't just stay with their friends but consciously moved around, very inclusive.

Joss Jewell

In the review with the children their feedback was that not only had they been less anxious but they had been able develop strategies to use to mix with new children. None felt isolated or overwhelmed in the new setting.

1.3 Creating a stronger voice.

How can a systemic approach enable children to voice their needs and interests?

Essential to teachers' understanding need and aptitude is the pupils' ability to voice concerns, ideas and feelings. We found that it wasn't only what the pupils had to say that mattered but the process of saying it in a direct yet sensitive way and being heard by others. This carried its own strong message – you belong!

Through the focused effort of working with exercises one head teacher acknowledged that it had given her a chance to talk about things 'that we haven't been able to talk about before'. Many participants noted that the children became more confident in talking about issues which concerned them and as a result were 'freed up' from some of the burden of anxiety that often inhibited them.

Indeed a key aspect of the systemic approach is the unique opportunity it affords to the children to unload and resolve some of 'the baggage' that inevitably prevents them from concentrating or even showing interest in their learning. There were many instances of something shifting particularly in the children who were experiencing learning blocks and frustrations. Caroline commented

Children who have previously seemed 'closed' have opened up.

There was also a more general benefit in allowing class groups to participate in discussion. Over the eight week period Alison Barclay commented to Val that she had

...noticed a change in quite a few of the children, increasing eye contact, starting off conversations with you themselves, increasing confidence and generally more relaxed.

How does the systemic approach enhance communication and provide a stronger voice? We feel the answer in part lies in the various and different forms of communication that are used.

We will also consider some of the techniques that enable people to speak about things which often do not get mentioned and yet the submerged presence restricts the child's ability to connect fully with learning. From the examples offered so far in this report it can be seen that writing and dialogue have parts to play in clarifying and communicating thoughts and feelings. Visual language using drawing and photographs can also be used well.

When working systemically, communicating spatial, kinaesthetic and verbal modes also have a crucial place too. The use of many different types of language is one of the reasons this approach is so easy to engage with – using Gardner's (1993) taxonomy, it speaks to a number of an individual's multiple intelligences. Below is an exploration of the different modes.

Spatial

When working systemically how the elements of a system are configured in space matters a great deal. It lies at the heart of the constellating process. The research shows countless examples of people in circles, line or more complex maps of a particular system. Working with a sense of direction and distance between the elements the children made 'maps' using such things as post-it notes on flip-chart paper, mobiles and each other. The children engaged with the process easily and drew a lot of information from it.

The children liked the mobiles and mention 'balance; quite naturally as the state in which they wish the class to be.'

The idea of balance and one or more people being able to 'tip the balance' is wonderfully demonstrated by the mobile if a blob of blu-tack on one tile of the mobile is used to represent a bad mood or squabble or some inappropriate behaviour.

Val Culff

Children asked to constellate their families. I asked for volunteers. Everyone seemed to pick up the idea of positioning their chosen representatives thoughtfully. Some put mums and dads who were living together close and touching, others a bit further apart. Parents who were not together were placed quite separate with new partners close.

Lesley Golledge

Kinaesthetic

Also pivotal to systemic working is a mode of communication which is based on kinaesthesia and which utilises the perception and sensing of the motion or position of the body. Perception and sensing are at two ends of a spectrum. The study provides examples where body movement becomes a powerful vehicle of communication – the act of bowing as a sign of respect, the act of placing indicators on a chart, movement towards a mobile, standing behind someone to offer support, the movement of an arm. Val described how she

...has developed an arm signal to indicate balance in the class at any particular time – arm held horizontal for balances and tilted for unbalanced – she uses this as an unspoken signal. They have now taken up the action. Last week when one child was being spoken to about disturbing others on his table, two of the children used this physical representation of feeling unbalanced.

And another reported on how the children had begun to use bowing as part of their vocabulary.

A spontaneously bowed to T saying, 'You're a great friend and you are part of this class. This incredible moment left T speechless.

Caroline Evans

Other approaches make use of the kinaesthetic and much is written about our use of body language. Where the systemic approach differs is in the use of the body as a sensing instrument i.e. paying attention to what the body is feeling in relation to another person or thing. For example, in one session Joss conducted a simple exercise

I got them to stand in the middle of a circle on their own and see what it was like. They hated it, they looked at the floor and shuffled. They then placed themselves linked with someone else and where they could see each other. It was better. They talked about the awfulness of being left out and how important it is to include each other.

Alison Mills developed an exercise that focussed on the children who were leaving to move up to the next class. Alison Barclay's notes recorded

At the end the children who were leaving stood in a line with the children who were staying in the class stood in a line behind them (including the TA and AM). I asked them to really feel the presence of those people and to 'take them with them'. The children then turned round and they swapped places so the children who were leaving stood behind those who were standing as a support.

A key phrase here is 'feel the presence'. It is not a matter of imagining or reading body language. There is no requirement to think but instead to open up the body's sensing ability to receive information. It is one of the most contentious aspects about this approach. It seems to work very powerfully and yet is difficult to explain.

Verbal

Another crucial form of communication is verbal. Many of the examples from the study show how important dialogue is to explain, reflect and make meaning. Where the systemic approach offers something different is in the use of words in a formalised or more ritual way. Often these words are given to the child to say.

Val designed an exercise where pupils were given lines to say out loud that began with 'I respect you because....'. She reported that 'all contributed and read out their statements very respectfully'.

In a similar vein she used lines from a poem at an emotional point in an exercise. She gave them to the girl who has two ill grandmothers and was acknowledging her sadness supported by the class

*"You raise me up so I can stand on mountains
You raise me up to walk on stormy seas
I am strong when I am on your shoulders
You raise me up to more than I can be."*

The use of sentences is a final example of formalised language. They are often used in constellations and seem to work very well with children enabling them to give voice to the realities of a specific experience in a supported way. If they are 'given' sentences it is easier perhaps for them to 'say' how it is – even when the situations are difficult.

Caroline offers a good example of the use of sentences to resolve an issue between two girls G & T, which the mother of G had brought to her notice.

Caroline brought them together equipped with short sentences to say to each other.

T I want to be a really good friend

G OK

T I'm sorry for how I have been'

G That's OK – it doesn't matter

CE No G – it's not OK – T has really hurt your feelings – It does matter say to T 'I accept you are sorry'

G I accept you are sorry

T (spontaneously) I will so do my best now G

G (spontaneously) I cried myself to sleep last night because of you

G looked so strong – and spoke in such a confident, no longer meek way - it was wonderful

T (spontaneously) If I had known and I was your sister – I would have come into your bedroom and hugged you and told you that everything was going to be alright . .

Spontaneously – they hugged!

Caroline reported that T and G remained firm friends for three weeks with no falling out. They do have their ups and downs but they can generally solve it themselves

A second example of using a formalised sentence was with children by a systemic coach following a discussion of their family situation after mapping them in with post-its on large sheets of paper.

My name is Sam. My mother and father love me. My father has died and I miss him. I don't understand why he had to leave me but I can still love him. He will always be my father.

So far in this section we have outlined a number of different forms of communication which in their own way create opportunities for children to voice their needs and interests. In most cases the children engaged in the range the systemic approach offered. In the case of working with sensing there was some resistance. Partly this was due to the initial strangeness of the request but we think it was also a testament to how the process takes teachers and pupils to those sensitive areas that are often acting as an undertow in their lives, inhibiting their full participation in learning experiences. An

example of this is when Val asked children for a volunteer to stand at the front of the class.

*Someone volunteered and stood there while the rest of the class looked at them.
What did it feel like?
'Embarrassing!' the child squirmed.
I then brought in someone to be a representative of that child's special support person.
'What's that like?'
Giggling
'No change – that's not my real grandfather'
One of the class pipes up that they have to imagine that is their grandfather – (the sheer simplicity and truth of this statement)
The representative is changed and the boy imagines this new supporter standing behind him to be his grandfather.
'That's different,' he says. The boy has stopped squirming, stopped giggling and is now smiling.
Amazing.*

The examples above demonstrate how an ability to 'acknowledge what is' actually going on is critical to giving full voice to need and interest. The very act of saying out loud 'a truth' often had its impact on the whole field.

Acknowledging what is: You could almost see the tension physically lift and she said that it felt good

Val Cuff

Some aspects of children's lives can be changed and based on an acknowledgement of the current situation teachers can help them to see how they can challenge or change their beliefs. And there are certain aspects of children's lives that are unable to be changed - some losses cannot be restored. Acknowledging and learning to live with the consequences of such immutable facts is one of the benefits of teachers facing into the realities of children's lives with them using this approach. The crucial importance of 'private and personal knowledge' has been identified recently by Desforges (2004).

We want to conclude this section with a quote taken from Val's learning log which seems to bring together many of the points we are making about 'voice'.

At the end of the session, after emotional sharing etc, we asked the children how they would like to finish so that we could all feel positive about our time together. They talked about how they might use a special person as support in everyday life. Some realised that people don't actually have to be with you anymore to love and support. One of the boys said 'I think we should have a shout. Let's all shout that we

love our families' Another boy said 'Yes and we don't need to feel sad if they're not here – they're still with us'. So we all shouted 'We all love our families' very loud!

1.4 A readiness to learn

Even with a good understanding of needs and aptitudes the individual child has to be in 'a right place' to learn before they can actually engage in the learning process - but this state of readiness can't be assumed. The question we asked ourselves was, how can teachers help children be ready to learn? There appear to be two aspects to this state of readiness - creating a calm and nurturing atmosphere in the classroom and helping to settle the child to be in a place and state of interest and concentration. The glimpses we have had suggest it is a fruitful area to explore and would benefit from more research and development.

Within the classroom the research showed that a number of strategies were already in place to create good conditions for learning. For example Circle Time was the norm in all of the schools; the innovative use of music was being used in others; clear aims communicated to the children; use of technical and visual aids.

Even so teachers were often battling against a number of factors in trying to get children to settle and concentrate on learning. Structurally the school environments were stimulating and, at times, inspirational. There were issues around noise and interruption – not surprising in small primary schools. We illustrate simple strategies based on 'stilling', support and respect

Three teachers worked with 'stilling' - asking children to close their eyes and focus on for example a person or good thought. A number used also the link to music and it seems a promising avenue to explore further.

The children encouraged to find a positive spot (where can sit on Islamic prayer mats) to have private thoughts/space – can contemplate open ended question e.g. happiness is . . . they can ponder/have space/pray

Caroline Evans

Most teachers also used the notion of bringing into the classroom 'a sense of a special supportive person'. Jane James reported that Joss had made use of special pictures with her group

Rachel gazed at hers 'I can do anything when he (Father) is behind me' Ben felt that his support (Grandmother) was nearby when his card was in his pocket and then felt the support was in the same room when the card was tucked into his waistband at the back.

Val brought the two exercises together

"A stilling exercise. Close you eyes and 'feel' your special people behind you. What do they look like, sound like, feel like? How is it to have them so close and strong behind you?"

*I felt more confident after I had talked about my Nan and imagined her behind me
Year 5 girl*

A major theme for most teachers was the exploration of respect which by all accounts helped to create an atmosphere of trust amongst the group. Lesley recorded:

I asked the children what respect meant and they came up with 'like' admire' and 'look up to'. I asked them why we should show respect to, for example children in year 6. They said because they ere older, they had been in the school longer, they knew more.

I then told them that I was going to suggest that we could show respect in a particular way. I asked for representatives from years 6 down to reception. I suggested that the year 5 representative could bow deeply to the year 6 representative and that all the other children could do the same in turn down the line.

Working to prepare the child for learning was far more involved. In some respects all of the work is helping to settle the child either directly or indirectly. At this stage of the report we will touch on briefly the ability to deal with incidents that leave the child feeling too unsettled or disturbed to learn and then return to it in the third section when we place the child in the school community. Lesley recounted her experience when the children asked to constellate their families.

Some put mums and dads who were living together close and touching, others a bit further apart. Parents who were not together were placed quite separate with new partners close. One boy, (who in the first session had said he knew his dad didn't love him) had had no contact with his real dad and didn't want him represented. I suggested he could position him anywhere he liked so he chose someone and asked if he could put him outside! I'm not sure if I should have said yes but suggested the edge of the circle and he almost pushed the representative into a place as far away as he could from mum and step-dad as possible. He did not bow to him. His anger was palpable.

This raises a whole raft of issues about how teachers who for the most part are untrained in dealing with such deep individual and family issues.

The outcomes recorded by teachers are quite impressive. One of the teachers, who focused throughout the duration of the pilot on five particular children in her Year 2/3 mixed class, noted the following improvement in two of them at the end of the project:

K – over the time of the project became much calmer. There was a huge reduction in tantrums. He was better able to keep his emotions in check, and he can speak more freely to the group. He accesses more help from them and from me and he is better connected.

A – is now much better socially placed in the class community. She is willing to talk about the good things in people instead of shouting out hurtful and rude things. The class have seen her in a new light and accepted her more as a person. She is better placed to learn

This was the story in almost every case with children calmer, more confident and relaxed; reductions in tantrums; children who have been excluded from the group are better socially placed; pupils instigating conversations, levels of rudeness and aggression lower.

Summary points

Teachers' awareness of need

- Much focus is placed on understanding development needs. The systemic approach reveals the deeper issues of motivational needs which were blocks to learning often lie.
- The source of many of these blocks lie outside of the classroom but some work can be done within the school to begin to alleviate them.

Children's awareness of their own needs

- Children have to be consciously aware of their own needs – it is a participatory process.
- There are interesting gender issues with girls seeming to embrace the approach more readily than boys. But both groups benefited considerably and used their knowledge to devise strategies to enhance their learning.

Pupils' voice

- There were many examples of the approach opening up dialogue between children and teachers that had hitherto been closed.
- Multiple intelligences are engaged through a variety of forms of communication which gives a richness to the exercises.
- The pivotal point in a healthy communication is being able to 'acknowledge what is'. That awareness in itself is inherently transformational and healing.

Readiness

- There are simple things the teacher can do to prepare the field for learning – stilling and support exercises are just two.
- Systemic awareness amongst the children and teachers increases the responsibility of the whole class to restore balance rather than being the responsibility of 'the one'.
- The systemic approach can also deal with pressing issues the child is carrying which are blocking her/his learning. Simple constellations is an example but that raises implications for training.

2. The Provision of Learning

2.1 Integrating systemic approaches into the curriculum

Is there space in an already crowded curriculum for something new? It is a pragmatic question which needs to be considered. Once more the pilot cannot offer definitive answers but there are some interesting pointers emerging from the data about possible ways to integrate the approach into existing activity. It is not a question of introducing more content but rather using the approach to broaden the learning experiences that are already required of schools. Below are some examples of how teaching activity and learning experience has benefited from phenomenological ways of working and systemic perspectives.

There are examples where teacher-researchers delightfully integrated some of the exercises into topics they had planned to teach in maths, history, RE, PSHE and Citizenship. For example, a class teacher used the support exercise in improve attainment in a maths test; Alison Mills used one of the exercises to explore hierarchy in medieval England. Caroline was able to make comparisons with Maori communities. She also explored the links between class elections, wider political systems and hierarchy. Val used 'balanced and unbalanced' as the basis of explanation of rules in a Religious Education unit.

The settings for this learning were mostly class or group based but there are instances of an engagement in whole school assemblies.

The teacher-researchers seemed to be introducing a certain freshness into subjects and topics by again appealing to a number of intelligences. The 'concepts' being explored by the children included respect, loyalty, trust, equality, harmony and systems. But in each case the teachers were giving the children opportunities to explore using their intellects but also their emotions. These methods open up interesting dimensions about knowing. What seemed important for the children was to make the connection between their family systems outside the school and then bring it inside.

Life is not just about knowledge and its acquisition...and to be well balanced caring adults; children need opportunities to explore all sorts of dimensions.

Alison Mills

The teachers used a range of phenomenological exercises such as constellating hierarchy or loss, making a mobile of the class system, visualising a special person, sensing the inner condition of a close friend. Out of these experiences the teachers were able to facilitate conversations, which seem to make the learning stick in ways that dialogue alone would not. One example was offered by Caroline:

The miracle question and solutions focused approach – imagine the spelling test - imagine you have done your best with every word – imagine the neat well-formed letters etc

Another is Val's comment after one session

...talking about what loyalty means with phenomenological approach – using representatives to experience loyalty and loss of it – this leads to embodied knowing.

We are struck by Val's use of the phrase 'embodied knowing'. It suggests depth rather than superficiality. Paraphrasing Lawrence Stenhouse writing in the late 1970's, it is the kind of 'knowing that is underneath the skin' rather than just in the head. Our sense is that although it is only a small phrase it has massive implications for enhancing children's learning and raises questions about the quality and breadth of engagement with learning that we are able to provide. There is not sufficient evidence to explore it further here but is an area that should be included in any further research.

The other important aspect of the teachers' efforts to integrate the approach is the development in the children of 'seeing systems'. The exercises encouraged children not to see a simple linear causality but to map elements and see patterns, themes, inter-relationships and consequence. The best example of this was probably the use of the class mobile, which most participants used with a high degree of success. Caroline referred to the use

...of the mobile as metaphor for classroom balance – it enables pupils to take responsibility for behaviour and the 'mechanics' of the classroom.

It became a vehicle for the class group to explore the consequence of behaviours on their system almost as they were happening and collectively evaluate at the end of their day.

The systemic and phenomenological approach seems to open up the receptivity of the children to the topic and allow a high level of engagement and learning

2.2 Co-creating learning

How can we develop and utilize the potential of this approach? The simple answer seems to be 'together'.

The project has been a co-creative experience in so many ways. Each individual whether adult or child, has made a creative contribution to the whole. In this section we want to briefly touch on the learning we have gained from this aspect of the project because we sense there are valuable lessons not only for future development but also for reinforcing the learning experience itself. Firstly we will consider the design of the project structure and then we will comment on some of the relational aspects of working together.

The project was designed as a collaborative initiative bringing together knowledge creation, learning and innovation – three distinct processes giving the project its edge. The implementation process reflects this combining training, design, classroom practice, coaching and meaning – making.

There is also an interesting interplay of roles the teacher-researcher, the children, the systemic coach-researcher and the constellator – each playing a significant part at different points during the process. For the writers the closest analogy is it has been like running a relay race in which the baton is handed over.

The process as it unfolded seems to have given us all certain ease and freedom to create within parameters as we produced training, lessons, toolkits and reports.
+++Design of next steps – keep some of the playfulness – local need

There is a subtler point emerging about the learning process. Scharmer (2003) states that almost all of our current learning theories and practices are based on Kolbian models of reflecting on past experiences. On the surface this project has a strong element of that but in the main we aren't using 'a past-driven' learning cycle. We are breaking new ground and therefore the learning we are all engaged in is more about learning from the future. The interplay of creativity and learning to co-design tools and exercises and to plan their implementation deserves further consideration.

The active contribution the children play in the process of co-creation also deserves special consideration. Their full participation makes it happen; their comments and perceptions are a rich source of insight; they are valued partners in innovation. They are also our measure of success. The data is full of gems resulting from their active involvement. Below are just two from Val's sessions:

We asked the children how they would like to finish so that we could all feel positive about our time together.

I asked them about feeding back, in Assembly, to the rest of the school...To our amazement they practically ALL said that they wanted to share the first session and L said she would like to read the words (A poem chosen to relate to her two ill grandmothers) even though they made her cry. Wow!

These examples and indeed the whole study is a contribution to the emerging insight that education is essentially relational in nature. The relationship between the teacher and the learner becomes the field within which the learning arises. Val commented on the response of the children after the death of her father during the project:

how their experiences and emotions overlapped and intertwined with ours as adults

It is a mutual journey in which the 'processes' of teachers and pupils are interdependent. Two issues emerge from this. One centres on the immediacy of working in this way with the learners need. How can teachers assess in the moment the inner conditions of the learners and combine that understanding with a planned approach? That's not without its difficulties.

We can cite an example from the research where the children are informed of the death of Val's father and then quite quickly taken into a planned session without really having

time to deal with the information which according to the systemic coach's notes wasn't the most successful session. It seems that there is a culture within education that makes it hard to 'stay with' emotion, safer to move on to something else. Part of what this project has offered is space for the expression of emotion and a recognition that children are far more ready to learn having done this.

A second question is how can teachers attend to themselves so that they influence the field positively? We'll address this question in the next section when we consider teachers' awareness of themselves.

Summary points

Integrating systemic approaches into the curriculum

- The systemic approach is essentially process based and can help support the delivery of existing curriculum content.
- The process is not simply intellectual but also uses 'body based awareness' which can deepen understanding
- Pattern and theme underpin systemic work challenging a simple linearity of cause and effect.

Co-creating learning

- The design of the structure of the project worked with an interesting interplay of research, learning and innovation, which facilitated co-creation.
- The role of the children was fundamental to any success – this is really their story.
- The relational nature of education has ramifications for how teachers can work in the moment and also for how they are in themselves.

Together these two aspects can support the provision of learning experiences which engage all children with an ease.

3. The Environment for Learning

Parker (2004) speaking about personalised learning at a recent conference, identified the importance of 'the learner as the point of integration' rather than the institution delivering the service. This view rightly shifts the discussion away from 'what we can provide' but it seems to make the learner rather too figural. If we are taking a systemic perspective then all parts of the system need to be taken into account simultaneously – not just the learner as an isolated element. By recognising and making central the inter-relatedness of all elements of a system quite surprising things begin to happen. Often a virtuous cycle of events is instigated. Franke-Gricksch 2003 explains:

When people change in their thoughts and action, their relationship to other people who demonstrate problematic behaviour also changes. This in turn has an effect on the behaviour itself just as with a mobile, where there is an impulse toward one element – this often quite surprisingly brings about changes in the relationships in the system as a whole.

In this section we consider three areas that contribute to the development and maintenance of the context for learning, specifically the environment provided by the classroom and school as a whole but also the wider systems beyond such as the family. Then we discuss some of the development implications for teachers who are an integral part of the systems they work in.

3.1 Developing a stronger sense of place in the school community

How can we facilitate a stronger sense of community within the class and school as a whole? The research project plan had anticipated that children would increase their sense of belonging to both the class and their school. This section looks at the development of community using a range of systemic tools and exercises. It was an area that all of the participants were keen to work on and most of their feedback was very encouraging.

Our premise is that a school system consists of inter-related sub-systems such as the class groups, the building, the head, the teachers and pupils, the education authorities, and numerous other external and cultural influences. It also consists of its whole history. This is the ground that supports or hinders learning.

All of the teacher-researchers recognised that a healthy and harmonious atmosphere in their classrooms and schools would provide a container for learning to take place. They used words such as balance, support, trust and caring as a measure of that health.

Children and adults are subject to a constant process of transformation. All learning brings perturbation, bringing fear as easily as satisfaction. Dialogue is necessary for this to be attended to and constellations and systemic working are also an aid in this process.

Below are examples of how the teacher-researchers worked on three areas of community: building a sense of place and balance respect and inclusion. In many instances, higher levels of support demonstrated by children for each other facilitated a better quality of contact and therefore enhanced the learning environment.

Place and balance

A fundamental step when using a systemic approach to achieve a healthy state is to allow the individual to develop a strong sense of place. Importantly, this sense of place is aligned with other key elements in the system. The systemic view is that everyone has a natural place in the systems they belong to - the family, the class, the school as a whole, the community – and that place is in relationship to ‘other’ based on such things as age, seniority, functional ability. Once each person in the system has found their right place then there is a better connection and flow between the various parts.

The teachers attended to this with great success by building a mobile to represent the class group. The mobiles were a simple but powerful representation of inter-connectedness for children, encouraging them to see themselves as part of a whole system rather than as an individual alone.

Mobiles were used as a focus for a review of the day: 'How have we been as a community today?' They can be used to encourage children to think what they can each do to restore balance and harmony if someone's distress or disturbance is affecting the group. The 'problem' child becomes the 'problem' for the class. The individuals belong together and have a common responsibility for the balance of the class

Below are some examples of how the teachers used mobiles as a metaphor to work actively on developing the class 'system'.

We completed the mobile by tying ourselves to pegs so we can peg on and off. As soon as our new windows were finished we put it in front of them and sometimes it blows gently in the wind...light reflecting off the laminate. We like it...

One evening after school I discovered that N had fallen off. As I put him and his peg on his table to sort out in the morning I thought how relevant this was to some of his behaviour over the past fortnight – he had been in fights and had been setting his peers against one another.

Roli Noyce

And again from Joss Jewell:

I have recently sent out a questionnaire to parents asking, amongst other things, about the improvements they have seen take place. This is one of the replies

'I like the introduction of smaller things like the special person, the mobile and the interesting way subjects and a caring attitude are approached'.

In fact lots of parents have been in to ask about the mobile and are really interested in it because the children in my class are really using it well ^ lots of problem solving and discussion and I haven't had to put a peg on anyone myself yet!

Joss Jewell took this notion of place a step further by exploring the affect of time as an ordering force on this sense of place with year six children shortly before they left the school. Alison Barclay, her systemic coach reported on the use of photographs of children who had been at the school a hundred years before to get a sense of many other children leaving this school.

We got them to stand as year 6 and one by one experience the children behind them of years gone past. They exhibited all kind of reactions – mostly they hadn't thought about this before, for some it made them feel stronger, that they were part of a process that so many other children had been a part of, over such a long period of time. One child said that he felt like a 'very small fish in a very big sea' and that was good. They seemed struck by the history as I was - the children that had inhabited that space (the first school room) for all those years.

Alison Barclay

Respect

A second area teachers worked on to build community was respect. If teachers and pupils had found a place for themselves then others need to respect it. This seemed to 'cement' their position in this system and provide a strong place from which to learn. Perhaps interestingly, the technique the teachers often used involved physically bowing to each other.

Surprisingly most children found it quite easy. There many stories of children taking it into their everyday way of relating to each other – even to settle disputes - and others where whole schools 'respected' the place each person in the system occupied. Some of these examples are given later.

For some the bowing exercise was very difficult – but even in the difficulty new insight was often gained into the child's situation.

One girl said it [bowing] felt weird whereas one of the boys said it felt fine to him as he was used to doing it in Tai Kwan Do. Another boy said he would not bow to anyone even though he could think of something to admire. As a result, his partner did not feel like bowing to him. We discussed why this might be. I suggested that the physical act of bowing was like submission and might make them feel vulnerable. We would need to trust the person we bowed to.

Lesley Golledge

Inclusion

A third aspect of the class strengthening its sense of community was an increased sense amongst the children of wanting to include rather than exclude. Constellations and the systemic approach contain some fascinating ideas about the inherent forces at play as people belong to or are excluded from groups. A number of teachers designed exercises that enabled children to experiment with group dynamics and adjust their behaviours accordingly. About one exercise Joss said

I got them to stand in the middle of a circle on their own and see what it was like. They hated it, they looked at the floor and shuffled. They then placed themselves linked with someone else and where they could see each other. It was better. They talked about the awfulness of being left out and how important it is to include each other

And of course the head teachers, teachers and teaching assistants are also important parts of the class and school systems. They have different roles and carry more authority and responsibility but they also belong. When this is properly acknowledged a shift inside the person occurs. For example, Janet reported

The children were given the chance to say something positive about each other and about themselves. I feel an incredible closeness to the children and feel that I benefited as much as they did – I felt like 'Janet' instead of Mrs A. The children I feel now have a greater trust in me and Val [the Head Teacher] and with each other

It is not possible to know what the outcomes of this work has been with a certainty but there are indications that it has led to improvements in how people relate to each other. There are numerous examples of children tending to interpersonal relationships more easily. In general, Caroline commented with the

...class as a safe place to express feelings and fears - a natural open-mindedness and tolerance was being nurtured and allowed into being

And she gave a specific example of J, one of the children she particularly needed to focus on, asking

if he could sit with Molly who had hurt her ear and seemed inconsolable. 'I was very moved overhearing his sensitive and gentle voice as he encouraged her and actually did calm her down

And from another school, a child who was reflecting on exploring her own feelings within the class said

Yes I cried, but then it felt lovely having my friends there and seeing others cry as well

Alison Barclay

Working in this area seemed to create a virtuous cycle. By feeling safe enough to disclose thoughts and feelings the quality of contact is improved. Alison Barclay reflected:

There has been an increase in trust as children learn more about each others' lives.

And a child commented to her after one of Val's sessions:

I know my teachers a bit more which makes me feel more relaxed.

These further demonstrate how systemic methods build off the work being done with emotional intelligence. Using Goleman's (1996) terms these are the domains of empathy and social skill. He describes 'empathy' as the fundamental relational skill of being able to recognise emotion in others and being more attuned to the subtle social signals that indicate what others need or want. 'Social skill' is the skill of managing emotions in others and it underpins interpersonal effectiveness.

In this section we have begun to show that working systemically can help to foster the class and school community. In the next section we consider the evidence for improving the links between school and family.

3.2 Closer links with family systems

The question we asked ourselves here was, how can the links between school and home – and to a lesser extent the wider community - be strengthened? It was one of the most important areas for us to explore, one to which we felt we could make a unique

contribution because of our experience in working in family systems. This area of work is acknowledged by Bransford, Brown and Cocking (1999) where they recognise that pupils spend more time out of school than they do in it and that the in-school transactions are inevitably informed and shaped by what they know and who they are in the community at large.

Our premise was the school system is inextricably connected to the families of origin of all the children – and teachers. Children, especially in primary schools, are embedded in their families. The evidence shows how much of that family life is brought into school and provides the context for learning. When this becomes ‘baggage’ it can have a direct effect on a pupils’ capacity to learn.

By introducing systemic practices, teachers could see the depth of the issues that some children were wrestling with daily - issues around illness, arguments, separation, death and the like.

During the ‘leaving session when children cried – it emerges that some children were crying for other losses. One girl couldn’t stop crying – she has a sister who has been in and out of care and has no father.

Alison Barclay

Several girls ‘missed’ their aunts after marital breakdown and separation – these ‘other’ female family members seem to be very important to some girls. They have sometimes been bridesmaids to them, the aunts act as role-models and adult friends. There is a loss and they do not know if and how to maintain the relationship after the marital disjuncture.

Jane James

One boy, (who in the first session had said he knew his dad didn’t love him) had had no contact with his real dad and didn’t want him represented. I suggested he could position him anywhere he liked so he chose someone and asked if he could put him outside! I’m not sure if I should have said yes but suggested the edge of the circle and he almost pushed the representative into a place as far away as he could from mum and step-dad as possible. He did not bow to him. His anger was palpable.

Lesley Golledge

Teachers, whilst not being able to resolve those issues (and often there was no resolution) cannot afford to ignore them either. But how best might they deal with them? It takes teachers into problematic areas.

Below are a few examples of how teachers in the project began to use two simple strategies to acknowledge what was going on for the child, help them to develop an understanding and begin a process of settling the learner. Those strategies included using simple constellations and developing a sense of support.

Simple constellations

Here we have two confident teachers who used the mapping process of a constellation to allow children to see their own family systems and begin to articulate what was going

on for them. To constellate in this way they could use post-it notes, desk-top objects, pieces of paper on the floor or each other. Children used the new language to explore and understand their situations – and in the second instance resolve an issue that had been troubling her – and our inference is that it was hindering her ability to engage fully in learning.

Some put mums and dads who were living together close and touching, others a bit further apart. Parents who were not together were placed quite separate with new partners close.

Lesley Golledge

One girl wanted Dad behind her (who doesn't live with her anymore). She said it didn't feel complete and chose her big brother to join Dad. Thought for a long time, a little upset and then she said she wanted Mum there too. You could see the tension physically lift and she said it felt good. We said that those people were all there for her even though they don't live together and may not be there for each other anymore. She was happy with this

Val Culff

A sense of support

We have commented in earlier sections on the benefits of developing support within the school environment. The systemic approach had an even bigger impact when its 'reach' was extended beyond the school. Educationists such as Marsh and Thompson (2001) emphasise how vital the role of parents is in the promotion of early literacy skills. Building on this knowledge, there are a number of comments about how the children are excited by the realisation that there is such a wide network of support for them both inside and outside school.

We present three techniques that are variations on a theme which have been developed by the teachers to bring support to the learners – standing behind, using pictures and drawings and stilling.

Standing behind - Val Culff asked her children to explore the physical sensation of support by first asking a child to stand at the front of the class by themselves. How do you feel? Then she added two children behind to act as support and asked again, how does this feel? She then asked the child to name who these people are for them.

Pictures and drawings – other teachers asked children to draw or make use of photographs of people who were special to them and meditate on them for a short while. At times of stress these were placed behind – in belts, sat on, stuck to the chair and the children asked to sense or imagine the person's support. Jane James reported on her:

... use of special pictures. Rachel gazed at hers 'I can do anything when he [her father] is behind me

Caroline had asked the learners to make drawings of special people

...the children became very precious over their drawings and talked in pairs. Some had drawn ill or dead people. I could see the children [were] able to off load worries.

Stilling and visualising – Val used an even simpler technique. She asked her group to

...close your eyes and 'feel' your special people behind you. What do they look like, sound like, feel like? How is it to have them so close and strong behind you?

One of our hopes of this project has been to find ways to connect family and school by bringing more visible respect to the situations and destinies of the families within the school setting. We will conclude this part of the discussion with a quote taken from the notes of Alison Barclay

Our work has touched into hearts and souls in the system. The connections between each child and other children, siblings, parents, step parents, aunts, grandparents, culture, roots as well as with their teachers, teaching assistants, heads and school have been highlighted.

3.3 Teacher's awareness of themselves

This section considers the questions, what is the significance of teachers becoming more aware of themselves and what are the consequences?

It might seem, at first glance, an odd place to put this exploration of awareness in a section on the environment for learning, but any map of a learner's immediate system will have the class teacher in a pivotal place. As observers in the classroom, we were often struck by the openness of the teachers with the children – their willingness to use their own families as a starter for discussion or for setting up a family constellation. The children responded with sensitive curiosity about the lives of the teachers and teaching assistants.

The teachers quickly realised they are an integral part of the learning system and therefore a major influence on it. In turn, they are influenced by the school and other systems. We explore both aspects below.

By working systemically they not only became sensitive to the needs and aptitudes of the learner but also became more open to their own vulnerabilities, uncertainties, passions and were better able to share developing thoughts and ideas. Alison Barclay echoed the thoughts of almost all the teacher-researchers in saying that it had helped

...us to understand who we are and our needs. From this we can try to interpret our behaviour and the effect of that behaviour on others.

Val unfortunately experienced the loss of her father during the period, which placed her in a vulnerable state for a while but she was 'open' about her position and remarked

The children responded brilliantly and there were times when it was impossible not to be openly moved.

There were a number of instances where participants felt happier. In particular the two TAs benefited enormously in this respect in that their place had been found and acknowledged by both staff and children

I feel honoured to be allowed into the children's thoughts and worries. Their trust in me makes me feel very special.

Jane Garrett

I am much happier – much more accepting of who children are, how they are. I don't get so frustrated because they are not behaving...

Janet Aylesbury

And staying with the positives, Alison Mills reflected that after all the work around finding a place she realised

...that I was in the right place in my career and have no ambition to climb the ladder.

There were also instances where the systemic work began to raise issues for the teachers which related to their own families and circumstances. For one teacher her relationship to her ill father became prominent and she went through a period of despair seeking and receiving some extra support. By the end of the project she was in a much better place claiming the way she had *started to view myself in relation to my Dad's illness has changed my life.*

Similarly Joss had experienced powerful shifts in how she was viewing herself.

This work has enabled me to make personal changes which have been life-changing. I am a different person - a better person from being involved in this work.

Obviously we are pleased to see and read about instances where the outcomes have been both profound and beneficial. It also raises our awareness to the importance of teachers having sufficient support particularly at the beginning of a systemic initiative. The design of this project successfully provided this support through coaching as well as through classroom visits, additional meetings and telephone and email contact.

Summary points

Developing a stronger sense of place in the school community

- Class as a safe and healthy container
- Crucial importance of place and balance
- Respect for people and place
- Developing a culture of inclusivity

Closer links with family systems

- Overlapping systems
- Surfacing difficult issues
- Gaining support from home

Teachers' awareness of themselves

- Teachers' as people are integral to a healthy system
- An openness to work on their own issues
- Getting support to develop a systemic capability

SECTION SIX: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The project is now complete. On 10 November 2004 we all came back together as a group to confer and agree our findings. We were joined by forty others, who also worked in primary and secondary schools, and together we shared in the celebration of the work we had undertaken. It has been a short but quite intense journey for those involved in this project over the past few months but those present at the conference saw the potential for significant benefit in schools. And importantly, the simple exercises and fresh perspectives were continuing to make a difference to the teachers' engagement with the learning process.

We have covered a good deal of ground in making sense of the experience of this project, exploring the development of simple tools, the innovative use of them and the impact that all of this has had. We are left with two major questions - What in particular has made the difference? And what next?

We stated a number of specific objectives and measures at the outset of the project, and though we have met each one, to focus on anyone of them would mask what overall difference this has made. The simple answer is an improvement in the culture for learning. It is an answer that shifts the emphasis from the parts – the learner, the teacher, the lessons, the reduction in incidents of conflict, the family – to a consideration of the **whole**. This is where our success lies. Everyone involved experienced a shift in their perception enabling them to better see all the parts and the connections and forces that were shaping the parts as a whole.

The practices and techniques outlined in this report helped teachers and children gain a better understanding of the interdependency of issues and subsystems within larger systems. They have come to see and sense connectedness and interrelationship rather than viewing individuals and particular symptoms or circumstances as isolated factors. Embracing this understanding, voicing and applying it, allows both children and adults in the school system to co-create and own a stronger community for learning across all dimensions.

As we draw our conclusions, we can distil our conclusions to four key features of building a community of learning.

- **Knowing the whole person.** Understanding motivational as well as developmental needs means teachers see more clearly their pupils as people – and the pupils see each other and the teachers in the same way. The focus shifts from behaviours to underlying causes. The work that is already in place using circle time is clearly helpful to this process but working systemically develops it further. It gives teachers a confidence to consider and work with areas of the learner's life that previously they would not have dared to venture into.

Our experience is that if issues are viewed systemically problems are more likely to be owned and faced up to by the whole community rather than resting with individuals alone. Even in the eight-week period of the research study there were

instances of teachers beginning to work proactively to prevent problems escalating.

- **Finding the right place in the whole.** Developing a sense of place means the various parts – people, roles, concepts - of the system can relax and focus on the task in hand namely learning. This applies to all involved but is particularly significant for the teaching assistants who benefited enormously.

A particularly important aspect of place involves viewing it through the dimension of time. Many of the schools could acknowledge and utilise their histories to reinforce the qualities of the present 'system' by paying attention to the heritage of past generations.

- **Home and school.** Of crucial importance are the stronger links made between home and school. On few occasions during the research, was the family directly involved but the children nevertheless felt they were better able to bring their home life into school. The positive aspects were used for example to provide a sense of support, whilst the negative aspects were identified, acknowledged and strategies devised to help cope with them. When feedback was received from the parents/carers it was very appreciative.

We know we only touched lightly on this aspect of the systemic approach and yet we saw a considerable effect. The potential for removing blocks to learning by developing this area further is immense.

- **Strengthening reflective learning.** We opened up the facility for people to shift their learning from a mode which predominantly uses their 'heads' to an engagement with emotions and senses. We are building on the emotional literacy initiative but our use of 'stilling', visualisation, and somatic exercises take it further. Teachers and pupils began to experience embodied learning which sensitised them to each other as a learning community and also to themselves as individuals.

In almost all cases the children simply accept this as a way of learning. What is more striking is how liberating many of the teachers found it in strengthening both themselves and their professional practice. Many report a greater sense of well-being as a result of working systemically.

We are of the view that every part of the educational system can benefit if systemic understanding is applied to it. Interestingly, this project works in the rich and vital context of the primary school but our belief is that every other sector could learn from the principles and practices that we have outlined.

There is more research to be done to refine our understanding of the process and find out about others who are beginning to work in this way. We would welcome the opportunity to engage in this with others. Already we have discovered groups working on large-scale projects in Mexico. Other experiments are occurring in the Netherlands and in Germany.

Future development possibilities are many. In general terms, this work can be replicated in other LEAS, in school clusters or across other sectors. For example, taking the work to Key Stage 3 might bring valuable benefit when disaffection and puberty often cause extra barriers to learning. And informal experiments are continuing with sixth formers in a Cambridgeshire school around peer counselling to excellent effect. Our project was located in a rural county; a similar project in an urban context would again provide opportunities for replication and comparison.

There is one specific challenge we would like to take up. It is to focus on those learners who are considered to be 'hard to educate' and whose behaviour often disrupts the learning of others. Daily teachers face pupils who have little residual respect for the learning process and who have a debilitating effect on sections of many schools. They are encouraged to employ a range of behaviour management strategies which meet with some success. But these, in essence, are designed to contain the problems and as such, McCormack 2004 writes, are approaches that often totter 'on a precipice; threatening to plunge into widespread disorder'.

Our systemic approach can begin to tackle the issues at root, not as problems to be faced by schools on behalf of society. By actively working with the learner's systems i.e. the personal, family and wider societal influences that are helping to give rise to disruptive behaviours – solutions can be found to learning issues that are considered intractable.

Three specific areas need attention to help drive the research and development process.

1. We need to create modular programmes for both primary and secondary sectors so that there is open access for teachers who want to develop skills and knowledge to meet their specific needs and within the constraints of their time.

2. We would like to work with the entire staff and all adults in a school that is experiencing difficulties, and which would provide them with a deeper kind of systemic experience - and produce valuable comparative research

3. We need to continue filling 'the toolbox' so that teachers have resource readily to hand. Coupled with this we need to provide practical explanations to enable the development of knowledge and understanding. The output of both of these would be a book or resource pack.

We want to direct our energy and commitment to co-create further possibilities and opportunities for this work to be shared, developed and increased. Our invitation is to anyone who, on reading this report, senses the power contained within the method and recognises the potential of the impact on educational systems.

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Appendices

APPENDIX ONE

An extract from an article by Bert Hellinger on -

The Phenomenological Approach in Psychotherapy Using Family Constellations as an Example

There are two movements leading to insight. One reaches out and grasps at what is yet unknown, attempting to seize its mystery. This is the way of science, and we know how much it has transformed, enriched and contributed to the safety of our lives.

The second way is to pause in our attempt to grasp understanding, and instead allow our attention to become wide and spacious, until we see the whole instead of its parts. Our gaze is prepared to take in the totality that presents itself to us at once. If we consent to this inner movement, for example when we look at a landscape, when we face a problem or a task in front of us, then we may notice how our visual field is full and empty at the same time. For we can only tolerate such wealth if we avoid looking at the individual parts. In doing so we withdraw into an empty space within, where we simply rest and wait, and from where we can meet diversity and totality.

I call this inward withdrawal phenomenological. It leads to different insights than any aggressive inquiry could ever bring to us. Still, the two movements complete one another. After all, in scientific investigation we need to pause now and then and direct our attention to a larger perspective; and even insights gained by phenomenological inquiry need examination from a specific point of view at times.

The Phenomenological Approach

In phenomenological inquiry one opens oneself up to perceiving a variety of phenomena without judging or focusing on any particular one. This kind of investigation requires an inner state devoid of pre-conceptions, intentions and judgements, particularly relating to inner movements, such as sensations, feelings or ideas. One's attention is both directed and devoid of direction, both focused and wide open at once.

A phenomenological stance demands readiness to act and yet refrains from action. In the dynamic of these opposites our perception intensifies. If one is able to tolerate the tension arising from these opposites, soon a context emerges, in which a variety of impressions seem to organise around a central theme, perhaps a deeper truth, and the next step will appear.

Family Constellations

The potential of the phenomenological approach and what it asks of us is particularly evident in family constellations. On the one hand the phenomenon of family constellations itself is a result of phenomenological inquiry, on the other hand the phenomenological process can only succeed in a posture of humility and trust in the very phenomena, its insights, and the very experience it allows us to gain.

Extract taken from – www.hellinger.com/international/english/hellinger_lectures_articles

APPENDIX TWO

nowhere foundation



A brief overview of Organisational Constellations

Constellations is an approach to renewing and renewable change.

Working in the field of personal and organisational development it is clear that most change initiatives provide temporary improvements in situations, but that the underlying dynamics of the organisation remain the same. There are some enduring qualities of an organisation that are clearly beneficial. For example, having a compelling vision that is aligned with a sense of the founding purpose and strong values can provide coherence to the organisation that is much more than the glue holding it together.

There are, however, underlying patterns of behaviour and meaning making as well as circumstantial and contextual issues that reduce the agility of an organisation to change and consume an effort and energy that could be better used to innovate or transform.

A new way of seeing and thinking about organisations

Organisations have an immense amount of energy, but potentially could release a lot more. They are often caught in knotted patterns or “entanglements” that prevent the healthy flow of a collective energy. Despite years of conventional interventions the sum of the collective is not always more than the sum of its individual parts. There are usually pockets of excellence, individual heroes and moments of peak performance in amongst a collective sub-optimal performance.

By adopting a view of organisations as a system of relationships, constellations ensures that one aspect of the system (be it a particular person, department or function) is not maximised at the expense of the other. Nor does it move the problem from one systemic element to the other in the appearance of making progress. Radical and sustainable transformation means re-constructing organisations in a way that makes it easier to deal with contradictions, opposites and multiple systems of thinking that organisations face in today’s economic environment.

Working with underlying issues

Constellating is an approach to whole systems working which looks at the issues and dynamics of an organisation (or other systems such as a partnership or community) using people as live representatives to provide feedback on the system. Importantly it looks at the consequences from past actions, and identifies hidden loyalties from the past. It also reveals the dynamics in the present. It can also work with the future in the present and point to resolving energies as well as bringing insights about the deep underlying, difficult issues that are holding a team or organisation back.

The constellating process

A constellation is set up to externalise the inner image that a client has of his or her system and represents it in three-dimensional space. It reveals the underlying dynamics that shape a system stripped of the details and points of view that lead to opinions and judgements. It reveals the hidden dynamics or the relationships between the things that make up the system. In this instance it could be the elements of the cost base. It also points to the hidden energies for change within the system, revealing where people would like to move and who seems to be holding tensions for the system or appears weighted down inappropriately.

To draw on a more rational, but possibly more familiar experience, a constellation is rather like using a Microsoft spreadsheet where it is possible to see how changing one value will affect all others. You can move things in the system and see how the rest of the system responds to the change.

Through this process of working with representative feedback, the constellation points to the strains within the system and shows what might be possible within the given realities of a situation and where support might most economically and usefully be focussed so that change can take place. Experimental moves are made and sentences are given in the constellated system until a resolution is reached in which all members of the system have their appropriate place and feel more at peace. The constellator makes the experimental moves guided by the representative feedback. The moves include things like shifting people's position to make sure there are clear lines of vision, taking into account existing hierarchies, or re-including marginalized or excluded members. The moves help to establish a better flow of energy through the system by everyone having a place and being in their right place for the function they serve. The sentences are used to face into the hidden realities of the system and to resolve hidden dynamics.

The resolved constellation provides a new internal image and a new felt experience for the issue holder, i.e. new (more compassionate) meanings which would continue to work, long after the completion of the constellation. By working with the unconscious assumptions, naming the taboos, acknowledging what isn't being said, or looking at the scapegoat as a doorway to an unspoken tension start to relax the system and release energy for change. This support of deeper more subtle transformation then supports the more traditional change processes enabling a re-connecting systems where they have previously been worked on as separate parts.

APPENDIX THREE

nowherefoundation

An abbreviated version of the funding proposal for participating teacher-researchers

**A research and development project -
Enhancing children's learning through applying a systemic approach in teaching.**

"It was one of the most incredible experiences of my teaching career to see and work with young people tackling problems that they had carried or were carrying deep inside themselves... I have used Constellations to improve curriculum design, peer relationships, teacher-pupil relations and management processes. I know I have only scratched the surface but I am excited by the possibilities that seem to be opening up"

John Norris: an assistant head from a Cambridgeshire Secondary School, June 2003

INTRODUCTION

The members of the Warminster Primary Heads Cluster, in partnership with the **nowhere**foundation, are researching and developing an approach to dealing with school issues using systemic processes based on Constellations (see Appendix 1 for a brief explanation of the constellating approach). The project outlined below will form part of a variety of school-based initiatives that are helping heads and teachers resolve the sorts of issues that seem impervious to conventional approaches.

This project aims to develop and test a new approach that helps teachers work systemically with their children in classroom situations so that a better learning environment is created which results in an improvement in learning outcomes.

Part of the history of this work involves a number of Head Teachers in Wiltshire and in particular those in the Warminster Primary Heads Cluster Group. As individuals and as a group, they have been participating in a small project called 'The Schools We Need...', exploring the use of Constellations for a little over a year. The main focus of this work has been to use the constellating process to resolve some of the most difficult issues they faced as managers of their schools – issues that lay deep in the family and organisational systems they were working with.

Although this work with constellations had an organisational focus, it is actually based on a 15 year track record in the field of family systems therapy. The main influences on the development of this systemic approach are V.Satir 1967 – family reconstruction; I.Boszormeni-Nagy 1973,1986 – intergenerational bonds and hidden loyalties; H. Maturanna 1985 – family systems; and Moreno, J.L., 1987.

The recent application of this work to family systems therapy is well documented Hellinger, B., Weber, G. and Beaumont, H., 1998, Ulsamer, B., 2003 and Franke, U., 2003 (also see www.hellinger.com and www.human-systems-institute.com).

This project began as we were drafting the conclusions to the initial pilot project. We identified a potential benefit that would result from extending the work from Head Teachers' management issues into the classroom itself. We believed it could have a direct influence on pupils and their desire to learn.

The concluding words of one Head Teacher offered this insight

I'm also quite interested to explore the use of constellation work with children. I am sure that there are very real possibilities for the use of this approach in order to develop their awareness of order, pattern and relationship within their lives.

A Warminster Primary Head: June 2003

It seemed to offer an extension to the 'Emotional Literacy' work being carried out in some Wiltshire schools offering a simple way of working with the whole child – but with particular regard to the situations they are living and learning in. A truly holistic approach.

Already, as part of the Schools We Need project, we had evidence from a Cambridgeshire secondary teacher who had shown the value of working with Constellations in classroom environments. His focus was on sixth form students acting as peer counsellors (see quote at the start of this paper and Appendix three).

At the same time, in Germany, Marianne Franke-Gricksch had been pioneering the approach in schools. She published her book in 2003 called 'You're One of Us' (see Appendix 2) offering an explanation of her work in Bavarian schools.

We are left with the view that the potential of this systemic approach in improving the quality of the learning environment in schools is considerable.

AIMS AND OUTCOMES

The aim of the project is to apply and test aspects of a systemic approach based on Constellations in classrooms in order to enhance the receptiveness of children to learning.

The central question is

How can teachers use systemic approaches to enhance children's learning?

What will the outcomes be?

The main beneficiaries of the project will be the pupils who will experience aspects of constellations which will enable them to work with a greater sense of respect, belonging and a balance of give and take in the learning environment.

It is likely that children who are manifesting difficult behaviours will experience noticeable shifts, although we hope that all will benefit from a general improvement in the climate for learning.

Behavioural outcomes in the children

Specifically, amongst the children there will be

- A reduction in the number of incidents of anger and conflict

- An increase in positive attitudes to learning
- A greater sense of belonging to the school
- A greater level of integration between school and family

Teachers will also benefit through the development of new perspectives and application of practical 'tools' in their work with children.

Development outcomes for the teachers

Specifically the teachers will

- Develop a wider view of the phenomenological systemic approach to classroom behaviours and learning.
- Develop greater awareness of, and sensitivity to, systemic issues manifesting in classrooms.
- Identify and assess children's 'blocks' to learning
- Apply their knowledge of the systemic approach to the development of learning strategies for children.

More difficult to measure but worth stating is, because the work is systemic, all other parts of the system will benefit including the schools as organisations as well as the families they serve.

How will we know?

The Children

Before the project begins we will establish a baseline of where the children involved in the project perceive they are against the stated outcomes above. We will use a combination of questions, which they can answer by rating their position on a scale. The precise nature of both the scale and the questions will be developed in association with colleagues at the International School Improvement and Effectiveness Centre (ISIEC), Institute of Education (IoE), University of London during the first phase of the project.

The Teachers

The learning outcomes will be agreed at the beginning of the training and the teachers will keep a learning log as part of their data archive. At the end of the project a short evaluative report will be written by each teacher. In these they will use the criteria to reflect on both the learning outcomes and the behavioural shifts amongst their pupils.

These writings will be used in the writing of an overarching report and which will be disseminated nationally. Again the framework for the reports will be guided by colleagues in the ISIEC at the Institute of Education (IoE).

How will the findings be disseminated?

This is a pilot project in the UK and so the use of findings to stimulate dialogue and validation is high on our agenda. Reports and data will be available as a result of the project. To date we have four different approaches to dissemination confirmed – web-sites, teachers journal, attendance at a conference and consultancy support. We expect that once the project is up and running these could be added to.

There are four web-based networks/communities that we hope to use –

We are working closely with Frank McNeil, the Director of the National Schools Improvement Network based at the IoE. It has over 1500 schools and LEAs on its dbase.

The Teacher Research network – (teacherresearch.net). The Wiltshire schools use the Bath University School of Education sponsored site for action research reports written by teachers – the main driver is Sarah Fletcher.

We will use also the **nowhere** foundation and Moving Constellations web-sites which have a wider focus than the education sector. (We also understand that the Innovation Unit at the DfES is developing a web-based database of innovative ideas)

We will also seek to publish findings in the IoE's Research Matters journal under the editorial guidance of Frank McNeil.

We will hold a conference either locally in Wiltshire and/or hope to speak at one of the Institute's national conferences.

The data will be tested and used proactively by the two consultants on the project, Alison Barclay and Jane James in their work with schools. And also by Jane Reed and Frank McNeil at the IoE to inform their consultancy work in schools nationally. All four are currently undertaking training to develop the skills and knowledge to work phenomenologically and systemically.

METHOD

Project structures that support the work

The project brings together primary head teachers, teachers and a small team of consultants who have constellating experience.

Project Team. The project leader is Alison Barclay who will work alongside Judith Hemming and Jane James in the project team. Judith will lead on the delivery of the training; Alison will lead on the preparatory and follow-up work with the teachers. Jane will lead on the sense making and writing up

Steering Group. The steering group's role is to agree the project outline, monitor progress and play an active role in evaluating the outcomes. It comprises 3 Head Teachers from the Warminster Cluster, Terry Ingham from the **nowhere** foundation. We will invite the Science and Assessment Adviser, Tom Robson from Wiltshire LEA to join this group.

The approach

29. The approach is, in the first instance, to train 12 primary classroom teachers in the use of constellating movements. Then support the teachers in working with their children and, in particular, gathering evidence of the work in the classroom. Thirdly, in making sense of and writing up findings.

30. There are three phases to the work

Insight

1. Designing and planning the research and development project and specifically the training/coaching.
2. Building a sense of common purpose and direction amongst a steering group
3. Exciting and enrolling selected teachers and their Heads for the work

Quest

4. Running a 2 day residential training course
5. Follow-up support - coaching, gathering research data and helping to organise the teachers'/pupils' reflective accounts.
6. Review and make meaning
7. Writing up a report

Inspire

Share insights and findings across the wider teacher network in Wiltshire and identify areas for further innovation.

APPENDIX FOUR

Enhancing children's learning through applying a systemic approach in teaching

Notes for the Residential Course with Judith, Ali and Jane 24th and 25th March at Ammerdown

Day One Wednesday March 24th

9.00 Arrival, registration.
Coffee/tea

9.30 Welcome and introduction Ali

Housekeeping and H&S information
Overview of the structure of the two days Ali

Round of introductions Jane
Clarification about confidentiality,
Model of learning/research (emerging rather than us knowing and them not)
Jane

10.00 *Initial exercise* 'What influences you in your teaching?' Judith

- Flip chart things that guide them e.g.
 - my family
 - my educational background
 - LEA support structures
 - educational/pedagogical theory
 - National Curriculum
 - own educational experience
 - experiential learning
 - commitment to holistic education

- Encourage the participants to constellate these with directional post-its on A3 paper.

Discuss in pairs or threes.

Collect papers and revisit later in the course.

(This activity is a way of creating a base-line view of the participants' systemic way of looking at themselves in their work. It will be possible to revisit the same activity later in order to see whether there is any change in perception or understanding).

10.45 Coffee

11.00

Phenomenological Exercises – a variety of exercises Judith

- Bowing in pairs according to age
- Bowing in pairs according to educational experience
- Bowing according to hierarchical status in school
- Intense observation and perception of an other; surmise state of emotions, physical state etc – then 'stand in other's place/shoes' to take on that person's state

11.30 Constellation with brief introduction from Judith on how constellations work as there will be 'new' participants

12.30 Or 1.00 Lunch and extended break for reflection, writing or rest.

3.00 Afternoon session

Focus on the four areas of outcome in the research proposal

- Belonging
- Anger and conflict
- Integration between home and family
- Increase in the positive attitudes to learning

Belonging

Allow one of the participants to represent a child.

The others place paper in relation to the child and name them e.g.

- place for child's home language
- respect for child's national/cultural heritage
- understanding of the importance of who might be missing
- respect for occupational and educational achievements of the family
- connection with a particularly trusted person in the child's life.

Explore the effect on the child representative.

Break the teachers into small groups in order to apply what they have experienced in this exercise this to their own experience of children.

Judith then to give a talk on bonding and belonging

Anger and Conflict

Two children to represent a situation of conflict e.g. larger child has hit a smaller child. Explore the sort of things that might go on e.g. Crowd gathering, 'He did better than me'.

Give the two children sentences to say e.g. 'What I did wasn't helpful, sorry I hurt you'.

'I'm too angry with you for the moment'.

Sincere apologies

Overall encourage the participants to really acknowledge the situation. Look at sentences that carry the truth and drain out the morality – de-escalating sentences.

Judith to talk on neurology of arousal and general input on anger and conflict

Break into smaller groups and get participants to gather conflicts that are recurring with their children, brainstorming in smaller groups and to find lists of possible resolving sentences.

Do small group constellations, (same groups) don't tell the representatives who they are but give them some of these sentences and see the effect.

5.45 End of afternoon session – with closing round if appropriate

5.45 – 6.30 Personal time

6.30 Evening meal

7.45 9.00 Evening session

Focus on giving and receiving between equals (neck massage each other), reaching and taking, being in the right place and the wrong place.

Offering participants a space to do personal work or to do work with a child's family (emphasising the roots of this work is in the family and this is not something that they will be expected to do).

9.00pm – 9.30pm Team meeting to outline Day Two

- We all felt it was important to have a session on fathers/maleness, at some stage
- That we would talk during the end of the first day about what we might do the second day, but that the afternoon needed to be on application into the classroom and how they might use Jane and Ali's support
- We would offer some practical suggestions for application of ideas to the classroom – some from Franke-Gricksch
- Ali will bring some CDs, flowers, candles and incense; we are wanting this to be a nurturing experience for them.
- Jane will bring a CD player (and some CDs) and dried fruit and nuts
- Jane and Ali will support the participants in what they are doing during the two days and act as a 'bridge' between them and Judith.

Practical ways of bringing systemic approaches into the classroom

Bowing

Photographs

Mirroring others

Mobile

Miracle question

Standing behind

Trance-like state practice – (though perhaps best not to use this word) – practice of 'quietening down' sleeping lions but with help to breathe; concentrate on different parts of the body.

Scaling feelings

Interface school and home

Songs and poems

Truth – changing contexts

'School according to the rhythm of the children':

'Perceiving the person across from you

Journey round your body – visit different organs

Visit your heart and light a candle

Imagination work

Time travel

Use of masks

Mobile of the class

Set up two protagonists

Gather data

Feed in sentences

1 that describe

2 that sincerely attend

APPENDIX FIVE - TOOLS FROM THE TOOLKIT

Systemic Approaches in Learning

Learning with a 'helper': photographs and representatives

Acknowledging supportive individuals from a child's family brings in a wider context for the child and makes an explicit connection to life outside school. Children can use this inner support from which to draw strength in order to be able to learn more effectively.

Children can use representation of particularly supportive individuals from their family in order to perform tasks more effectively e.g. maths tests, SATS, spelling etc. This link seems to make it possible for them to feel more confident through bringing support from their world outside the school into their world within it. It is also possible for the children to conduct their own experiments undertaking tasks with and without the support for comparison.

Aim

To increase children's enthusiasm for learning by internalising support from an individual 'outside' the school.

Method Children can feel this support in various ways. It seems that support from **behind** is most effective ie the picture is tucked in the back of the belt, or the child imagines the support person stood behind them.

- Children bring in a photograph of someone that they feel supported by, either in their family or outside of their family. They can tell each other in circle time what makes them feel supported about this person. These photographs can then be put in a back pocket when support is needed.
- A child can be used to represent the person that another child feels supported by. The representative stands behind the child. Encourage the child to imagine the representative **is** this person. (The representative does not have to do anything other than stand there).
- Ask children to imagine that the person who supports them is standing behind them. Encourage them to visualise by shutting their eyes.

Systemic Approaches in Learning

Increasing children's knowledge of themselves and each other

If children are encouraged to learn about themselves in new and different ways and to learn about others they increase their sensitivity to their own needs and can be more in touch with the needs and feelings of others. Through these exercises, feelings of trust can be created which contribute towards a developing sense of community. Children can learn to read each other's body language and communicate and understand emotions more effectively-

Aims

To increase children's emotional intelligence, both in regards to themselves and each other. To increase children's sense of community.

Methods

- **A guessing game** What is my body language saying about me? Children pick a card with a feeling written on it. They then use their body language to show this feeling whilst others guess recording their answers on wipe boards.
- **Feelings thermometers** Each child has a calibrated card with four or five colours representing feelings from happiness to sadness. Each card has a peg attached. Children can indicate their feelings by moving the peg. This can be done after a particular activity or if a child wants to communicate a mood or response at any time in the classroom
- **Conveying feelings without words** This activity is a way of encouraging children to convey emotions and feeling without speaking. Individual children have to display a feeling (that has been written on a card) to another child sitting on a chair e.g. 'I want to be your friend', 'I feel angry'. The other children have to guess what was on the card.
- **Groupings.** In a large space, children are asked to group themselves according to different categories in each phase of the activity eg
- been in school since reception, or joined later
have no siblings or one or two or more
walk to school, arrive by bus, arrive by car etc

The children stand together in the group if and consider how they feel. They can also be asked what they would like to know about each other.

Systemic Approaches in Learning

Mobiles – A metaphor for classroom balance and harmony

When people change in their thoughts and action, their relationship to other people who demonstrate problematic behaviour also changes. This in turn has an impact on the behaviour itself, just as with a mobile, where an impulse toward one element – often quite surprisingly – brings about changes in the relationships in the system as a whole’.

Molnar a. Lindquist 1997

Mobiles offer a visual and attractive way of seeing that movement of one part affects the whole. Children begin to understand ‘connection’ and that any action they might take has an effect on the whole class or community.

The mobile itself can be used as a tool to evaluate how the class is feeling. ‘Is the mobile (class) balanced?’, if not ‘what needs to happen to rebalance it?’. The mobile symbol can help the class to take responsibility for issues rather than blaming. Any misbalance becomes the class’s ‘problem’ rather than the individual’s.

Extra weights in the form of pegs or ‘blutack’ can be hung on to the mobile to represent lack of harmony.

Aim: To increase a sense of community by enhancing the feeling of connection to each other within the class. To broaden children’s perspectives by illustrating the cause and effect of an individual’s behaviour on the whole class.

Method:

The class designs the mobile together as a group project aiming for a balanced structure representing all the individuals in the group including the teacher and any assistants. This can be done with:

- self-portraits drawn on individual card and laminated
- photographs stuck onto individual card
- blown eggs painted by the children
- other figurative representations of individuals made from paper, card or fabric
-

These representations are then tied to cotton and hung from crossed wood in order to create a balanced mobile.