

Information about the principal author

Terry Ingham is the Managing Director of the **nowhere** foundation, a not-for-profit organisation that specialises in the research, design and application of co-creative practices in organisational and social systems.

A former teacher in secondary schools, I am leading a groundbreaking project that utilizes systemic approaches to remove the fundamental blocks that prevent many children connecting fully in learning in school situations.

I work as a researcher and consultant in a range of commercial, government and education sector organisations, holding a particular interest in the dynamic relationship between knowledge, innovation and learning.

I am contactable at:

nowhere foundation
2 Wallace Rd
Bath
BA1 6QQ

078 66 60 77 89

email: terry.ingham@nowherefoundation.org

A research and innovation project to Enhance Children's Learning

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Terry Ingham, Judith Hemming and Jane James

'I want to find the missing link – what it is that stops or limits some children from learning and fulfilling their potential. The children I am most concerned about at present, attend regularly, but don't fully engage.'

Bella - a teacher/researcher

We are soon to complete an eighteen month research and innovation project that is funded by the Innovation Unit at the Department for Education and Skills. It is designed to explore the affect of using systemic perspectives and tools, which are based on the constellating methodology, on children's ability to learn. As a group of educationalists we felt that approaches based on behavioural and cognitive approaches are having limited effect on developing appropriate behaviours for learning amongst pupils.

The results are extremely encouraging particularly with regard to improving the performance of a number of children who find difficulty in engaging with classroom learning processes. Below is a brief summary of the project and its findings.

What we seek to achieve?

The key research question:

'What is the effect on learning of the wider groupings and systems that children belong to?'

More specifically we ask:

- How can we enable teachers to work systemically?
- What is the effect of working systemically on children's learning?
- How sustainable is this approach?

Our thinking is based on a view that there has been much resource put into raising standards by government and LEAs over the last eight years and, whilst meeting with a good deal of success, difficulties still remain. Key Stage 2 results are improving but are still below expectations, particularly amongst the 20% of underachievers.

Similarly the efforts to improve behaviour have been considerable resulting in initiatives such as SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning), the application of circle time and emotional literacy techniques and other behaviour management strategies. And yet, the incidents of

violence, disruption, disaffection and absenteeism continue to make the task of teaching more and more challenging.

Many of the responses to improving learning and behaviour are underpinned by behavioural/cognitive psychological models which place a strong emphasis on the individual – on the mechanics of learning or on how children respond to particular stimuli or curricula.

Our insight is to draw on work with families and organisations using systems-centred methods and techniques developed over the last 30 years, primarily in Germany by practitioners including Franke 2003, Franke-Gricksch 2004; Hellinger, Weber and Beaumont 1998; Senge 1990; de Shazer 1985; Ulsamer 2003.

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

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

Conducting the research

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

We worked 'co-creatively' as a group of four consultants from the **nowhere** foundation, alongside 22 head teachers, classroom teachers and teaching assistants from eight primary schools in Wiltshire.

We ran the pilot in two action research cycles. The first cohort of ten teachers did the initial development of the training and the tools and fed back their findings in July 2004. These were interrogated, further developed and put into an evaluation report in November 2004. We disseminated the insights and practices at three conferences in Wiltshire, Amsterdam and Barcelona – to validate findings and gain further insight.

In January 2005, with second phase funding, we began to work with twelve new teachers mostly from the same schools. At the same time we continued to support and track the work of the existing group. We wanted to develop further the tools and training, assess its sustainability, develop success criteria and begin to evaluate effectiveness. Sections of this second phase were also videoed and used as footage in a DVD explaining some of the key aspects of the work.

Our outputs include the

- Development of a conceptual framework which describes a flow of learning
- Development of a series of key metrics for success

- Design of a number of tools and exercises that can be used by teachers in the classroom
- Development of a short training/coaching programme to develop teachers skills and understanding in the use of the tools
- Application of their skills and tools in classroom situations – innovating and refining the approaches over time
- Gathering data from the teachers and children, including video footage
- Making sense of the approach in educational terms

What has happened?

This pilot places great emphasis on *innovating*. It enables us all to take the seeds of ideas, develop sufficient skills and understanding to work with them and then to try them out in the classroom – a truly authentic co-creative way of working. Inevitably, because of the relatively small scale of the project and the qualitative nature of the research, the results can only be indicative but they have exceeded our expectations.

At a technical level, all teacher/researchers have worked with a high level of creativity, even when they were sceptical of some of the aspects of the approach. In so doing they have made it their own, as they have been dynamically and co-creatively involved. There has been sharing across the groups enabling teachers to design and fit the tools to suit their purposes. New tools and exercises have been created and reflective accounts and case studies written. Almost all involved have clarified their intentions and plans for continued application and refinement in this new academic year (2005/06).

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

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

We are still collecting evidence from both groups of teacher/researchers and will include it in a fuller report in December. We already have a better understanding of some of the debilitating issues that teachers are facing when tackling resistance to children's engagement with learning and how to meet their needs in order to raise levels of attainment.

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

Making meaning

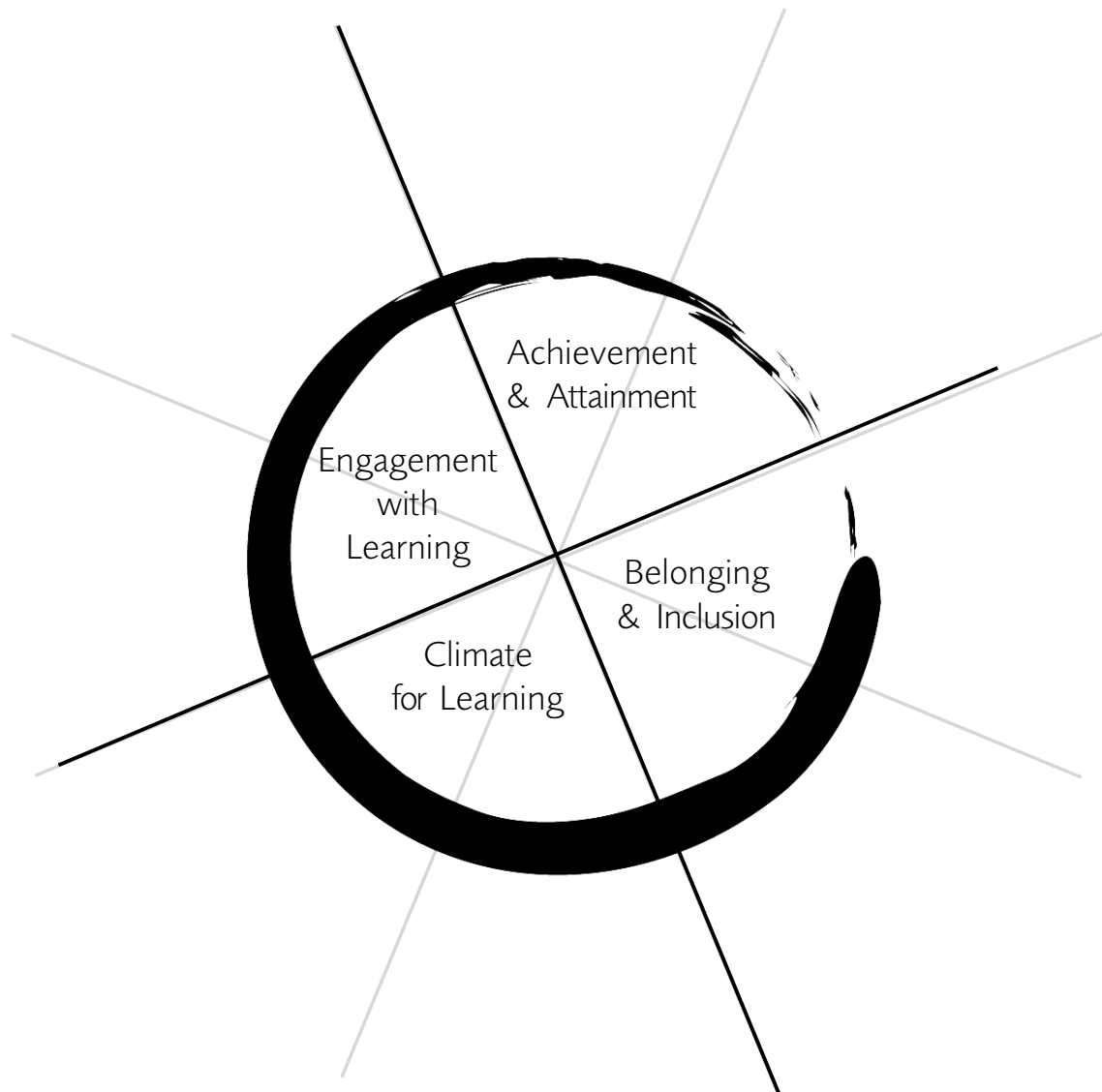
In general terms the major shifts that the teacher/researchers have made in their practice include an improved ability to develop a systemic intelligence which goes beyond seeing the child as an individual, or considering the content of an issue. The depth of engagement allows them to

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

This container for learning has several key characteristics that are captured in the model below. It shows a flow of learning that is characterised by four phases.

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

A Flow of Learning



Key Findings

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

Belonging & Inclusion

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

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

With everyone in their right place children

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

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

Teachers are then able to

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

Climate for Learning

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

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

When the systems are in balance

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

Engagement with Learning

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

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

Success criteria include

- They are more easily settled and quiet
- Children are better able to concentrate on their work

- They tend to be more punctual in arriving at school
- They deliver homework tasks more readily.

Achievement & Standards

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

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

Indications are that

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

Concluding thoughts

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

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

nowherefoundation

The **nowhere**foundation is a not for profit organization dedicated to expanding the creativity and consciousness of people, organisations and social systems. We work in community with leading edge practitioners and thinkers researching and developing approaches that lead to new ways of being, living and working together.

Using our insights and innovations, we offer workshops, training, and consultancy to support the development of transformational practices.

For further information: www.nowherefoundation.org

Further reading

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