Leading Enquiry in CHiLL Network schools

National Teacher Research Panel
engaging teacher expertise

Aims of the project

The aims of the CHiLL Network are to strive to develop leadership and learning at all levels in our schools. We pursue school development through processes of self-evaluation and enquiry, critical-friendship, collaborative training and networking. We encourage all to take responsibility for learning and leadership; we promote the values of honesty, courage and trust; we emphasise the importance of research, collaboration, diversity and excellence. This paper focuses on how we lead a wide variety of enquiries across our network and within our schools using an external consultant - a critical-friend.

Dimensions of the study

Whilst the contexts of the enquiry differ, the supported model of self-evaluation remains identical. It is in the context of these enquiries and the subsequent self-evaluation that we have learned much about the leadership of enquiry. We complete a school evaluation at the end of each annual cycle. Some recent areas of enquiry have been: students' independent learning; the school as a learning centre; the effectiveness of the school leadership team; the value of Teaching Assistants in the school; the use of ICT in school learning; children's creativity and how parents support their children's learning. There is a lot of this background evidence on our network website www.chillnetwork.org.uk.

Summary of main findings

- The role of the critical-friend in leading the enquiry was essential.
- It was important to ask insightful questions which challenge.
- It was important to incorporate children's voice in school self-evaluation.
- School culture was found to be inextricably linked to school leadership.
- It was important to believe in the process we used and to trust one another.
- Using knowledge gained from outside the group; bridging research and practice has been central to success within the network.

Background and context

The Network has evolved since 1998 when John Jones initiated a self-evaluation pilot group of twenty volunteer schools. Six of the original primary schools are still part of CHiLL; fifteen of the schools in the network have been involved for the last three years since we became a NCSL networked learning community in January 2003. There are currently thirty-five schools in the network, geographically dispersed across Cheshire. There is a broad range of schools in terms of character, disposition, size and variety. There are approximately 6000 children in the network, 250 teachers and 150 teaching-assistants. Three schools are not part of Cheshire LA.

Network schools apply the process of school self-evaluation, supported by a 'critical-friend', a trained Headteacher, from within the network. Dispersed leadership is modelled within the network. There are three co-leaders and a steering group of sixteen colleagues comprising 4 Teachers, 4 deputy heads, 4 headteachers, 2 teaching assistants and 2 network based critical-friends; John Jones remains a critical-friend to the network as a whole. We use network critical-friends to provide critical friendship to some individual schools, enable our network to access wider learning, provide quality assurance for the network and its processes, and to organise international links.

The network provides continuous professional development through a range of termly meetings for headteachers and deputy headteachers. There are also termly meetings for teachers, teaching assistants and students; schools nominate two delegates a term. We share good practice across the network through 'bring-n-brag' sessions, and provide workshops on new initiatives. CHiLL also provides annual critical-friendship training and an annual network conference in February open to all network colleagues.

Processes and strategies

Building capacity for the leadership of enquiry

Annual critical-friendship training has taken place to allow individuals to learn how to act as critical-friends, to learn how to lead enquiry and support reflective practice. The uptake of the activity across the network is 60% of headteachers training annually. There were positive links to children's learning and to leadership learning.

The deputy headteacher network was aimed at improving levels of learning by involving deputy heads in reflection about their leadership. This was a network wide activity and also had some aspects that were between schools; these took place termly and involved 40 – 50% of leaders. The activity was aimed at adult learning and leadership learning but was felt to have a positive effect on children's learning in the process.

Termly meetings were structured in order to share experiences and learning between schools allowing participants to reflect on processes discussed. The scope was network-to-network, network wide and between schools. The activity involved teachers, teaching-assistants and students and 65% of schools were represented. Learning and leadership-learning occurred through reflection between delegates.

The network annual conference involved the whole network meeting for a day. Around 40% of staff from the network has attended an annual event; there were strong pupil learning and leadership learning linkages.

How we lead the process for self-evaluation enquiry

1. Initial Meeting. The critical-friend meets with Headteacher and possibly other co-leaders. The purpose of the meeting is to identify the school's present position, context, needs, current practices and arrangements for review and evaluation. The critical-friend will outline the CHiLL process for self- evaluation. The critical-friend helps to identify the focus for evaluation or development outlining their intuition in this area and building from where the school currently is. The school agrees its purposes and the reasons why it matters. These form the success criteria for the enquiry and the focus of self-evaluation.

The Self evaluation Process
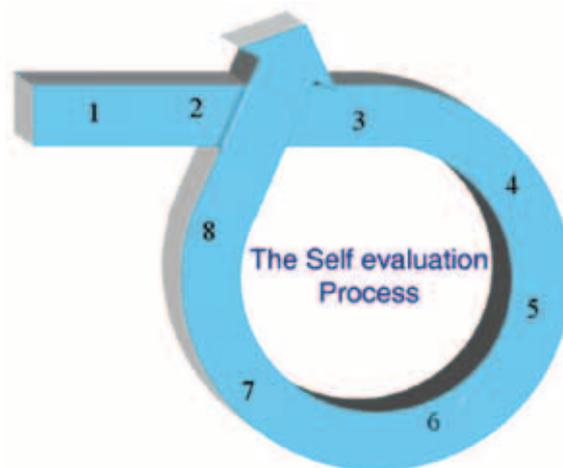
The school needs to decide who the audience for the enquiry is and who they want to be involved in collecting the evidence? The outcome of the meeting is an agreed statement about the school's needs, an agreed focus, purposes and success criteria for the school's involvement in the project. The critical-friend facilitates by questioning and probing, recording key phrases and thoughts, listening and observing. They must be aware of personalities, encourage trust, ensure confidentiality, put people at their ease and resolve any conflict.

2. Agreeing a detailed focus for the enquiry. The critical-friend goes away and produces a written outline detailing the agreed criteria for the focus and the success criteria. The second meeting takes place with all those who are to be involved. The purpose of

the meeting is to outline what the school intends to evaluate. The critical-friend feeds back why the school has chosen the focus and who will do the evaluation. The critical-friend needs to assure stakeholders that they are not there to solve their problem, only to provide objective support, challenge and guidance. The remainder of the meeting is used to plan for the self-evaluation journey. The critical-friend will outline and revisit the process, and reflect back the key phrases and thoughts. The critical-friend also helps everyone agree protocols for the information collection, in particular, lesson observation. There are opportunities for school leaders to delegate the leadership of various elements to other team members. Finally, everyone agrees the success criteria and what they mean.

3. Organising information collection. The critical-friend helps the group plan strategies for collecting information and organising research. These strategies can take many different formats depending on what the enquiry focuses on. Different groups may be supported independently by the critical-friend to help create the 'instruments' to collect observations and evidence; for example, surveys for children, questionnaires for parents and evidence collection forms for lesson observations. It may be that the 'researchers' need some training by the critical-friend on lesson observation. It is important that agreement is reached on the ground rules for such evidence collection; the emphasis needs to be on objectively collecting evidence of agreed things taking place, not upon the 'researchers' making judgements about what they see.

Certain that these are happening	Good / strong things	Need to improve
Possible that these are happening	Good / strong things	Need to improve

4. Gathering information. The team begin the lengthy process of gathering evidence to support the enquiry. This could take the form of hard data like statistical analysis or soft data like asking / listening to children, asking / listening to other stakeholders, perception analysis of Stakeholders, meetings with the Governing Body and interviews with non-teaching staff. By a date agreed, the evidence is collected and collated. Each research group feeds back to the group with no more than five key areas.

5. Turning information into conclusions. A third meeting is held for all involved. One hour is spent sharing and reviewing the information. Evidence from various sources is shared and the critical-friend helps 'triangulate' common strands that demonstrate what the school does well and what it could do better. They can be recorded on a flipchart, as in the diagram and moved around or discarded depending on what everyone agrees. Ownership is the key to finding successful conclusions. The group record their reactions to the conclusions. The analysis of success boosts confidence, which in turn develops skill. Issues become clear and are non-judgmental and evidence based; agreement is reached outlining suggestions for further development.

6. Turning conclusions to strategies. In the second hour, the group discusses the development areas and begins to agree on strategies for improvement. The outcomes are recorded and the group agrees six intended actions; 'we now intend to ……..' It is essential that strategies are appropriate and have credibility with the whole group. The group agrees plans for future development and who will co-ordinate and produce action plans.

7. Reporting back to audience. Depending upon the audience, a fourth meeting may be required. The purpose is to celebrate the schools' successes, share development areas from conclusions and share strategies and development plans. 'This is what we have done'

8. Reviewing & evaluating. All those involved, including the audience if the school thinks this could be advantageous, review what they have learned from the enquiry journey, review the process of self-evaluation and identify possible areas for future evaluation.

The critical-friend's role through out the process is to: facilitate; record and chart; time / diary plan; manage meetings; moderate the process; validate the steps and the 'instruments' used; train; and manage the anxieties and emotion.

The findings

Evidence from the Network's own research group, as well as the International exchange critical-friend enquiry suggests that:

- the role of the critical-friend to lead the enquiry has been important. All headteachers surveyed, strongly agreed that critical-friendships had contributed to schools having a shared vision, values and beliefs;

- it was important to ask insightful questions which challenge. In our experience it has been the development of a questioning culture, which has formed the 'hot-bed' of school improvement. As theories develop in response to the right questions, we have found that the most important characteristic of an enquiry is the questions we ask and the problems they identify;

- it was important to incorporate children's voice in school self-evaluation. Ensuring pupil voice was taken seriously had a positive impact on children's self-esteem. According to one pupil: "We now feel more confident to be able to tell the teachers what we feel is right or wrong and they listen to us and try to take action to help us";

- school culture was found to be inextricably linked to school leadership. CHiLL was considered by school leaders to have created a more collegiate style of management. Senior managers felt they had developed dispersed leadership through supported delegation;

- it was important to believe in the process we used and to trust one another;

- using knowledge gained from outside the group benefited schools within the network. The international exchange enabled school-leaders to take a more strategic view of their work. One commented, "while being immersed in the review of another school I was able to reflect on my own practice"; and

- bridging research and practice has been central to success within the network.

Research methods

We have carried out a number of network-wide evaluations independently and with the support of NCSL. A research paper was completed in February 2005. The findings in this paper are an amalgam of our network's thinking over the last eight years. They are supported by a wide variety of case-studies and objective evaluations. We have also undertaken an international exchange programme which has enabled the network, particularly the thirty critical-friends that have taken part, to ratify the process, to experiment beyond our education system and culture, to test it's validity, to refine and finally to reach consensus that the CHiLL process can make effective change in all schools.

Research Paper

The research project began during the autumn term 2004 to research into CHiLL's impact on children, staff, schools and the network. A team of eight was formed to gather evidence from different CHiLL schools, over half of CHiLL's Headteachers, and a variety of voices from CHiLL school communities. The evidence was based on interviews with pupils, senior managers, teachers and teaching assistants, as well as questionnaires completed by school staff. The overall evidence base was both convincing and appropriate. The group agreed to key criteria for each chapter, before evidence gathering began.

International Exchange Critical Friend Enquiry

Since 2002, Head and Deputy Headteachers in Cheshire have joined with their peers in New Zealand, Norway and Holland in "critical-friend" exchanges. The schemes have proved rich in learning about school leadership and leadership-for-learning. As a "critical-friend" in a different educational system, in a different culture and society, school leaders found their assumptions were significantly challenged and their skills were significantly developed.

The process runs like this. A group of headteachers in country A forms an exchange with a group in country B; each year A visits B for a long week (Saturday to Saturday) and B visits A similarly. During the week they conduct an enquiry into a negotiated focus (some aspect of learning and leadership-for-learning) and provide feedback in an agreed way at the end of the week. Training for A and B together takes place on the Saturday/ Sunday preceding the school enquiry. The initial training is for the host headteachers to brief their visiting "critical-friends" in the education system / culture of the country; for both to understand and agree the process of enquiry to be used by the critical-friend in the school during the week; for both to reflect on the concept of "critical-friendship"; to plan the practicalities of the week ahead. At the end of each leg of the exchange, all parties evaluate the process.

Conclusion

The role of the critical-friend is consistently cited by all stakeholders as key to successful enquiry. It is essential to have the objective support of this independent consultant to provide challenge, to keep the process on task and to support the leader during change. Through enquiry we gather the evidence to allow us to evaluate school practice; enquiry is a method that leads to a successful self-evaluation. When everyone is struggling to find a way forward, a belief in the process and trusting one another provides a non-threatening vehicle for change in our schools.

One common philosophy in all our schools is that the child is at the centre of everything we do. The key to effective child-centred improvement is the children's voice. Children are involved directly in self-evaluation and so in running their school, this has been very powerful. We have found that teachers who help children find a voice have discovered that their own voices are clearer and stronger.

As a network we acknowledge the importance of a 'network critical-friend'. They act as a 'shaman', gathering knowledge, ideas and the latest research from outside the group. John Jones is an associate of Cambridge University and he helps the network to bridge research and practice. This 'new learning' is shared at our termly meetings. They provide excellent CPD opportunities for all staff and keep our thinking and practice at the forefront of current educational debate.

In any school there will be some fundamental assumptions that advocates of all the different ways of thinking unconsciously take for granted. These deep-seated attitudes constitute our ideology and they set the boundaries of theory by inclining us to this or that set of issues and explanations. If our explanations are theoretical, our questions are ideological.

A good question is a light that illuminates things that had no form for us before the light fell on it and gave it meaning.

Suggestions for further reading

"Emotional Intelligence" Daniel Goleman *Bloomsbury Press*
"Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind" Guy Claxton *Fourth Estate*, 1997
"Flow" M Csikszentmihalyi *Harper Collins*, 1990
"Emotional Intelligence" C. Corry *Network Press*, 2003
"Changing Schools" *Stoll & Fink*, OU press
"How to improve your School" *Brighouse & Woods, Routhledge*
"School Leadership" Grace, *Falmer Press*

Author and contact details

Martin Casserley
CHiLL Network Co-leader
Headteacher, Black Firs Primary School

Email: mcasserley@black-firs.co.uk

Website: www.chillnetwork.org.uk

Snail mail: Longdown Road
                     Congleton
                     Cheshire
                     CW12 4QJ.

                     Tel: 01260 272935

National Teacher Research Panel
engaging teacher expertise