

# Schools facing outwards

**Graham Handscomb** asks whether preoccupation with raising performance is limiting children's horizons and highlights the professional development dividends of outward-facing schools.

## ■ ■ ■ Limited outlook?

The mind-set and outlook of schools in 2014 is markedly different to that of previous eras. The emphasis is on schools being autonomous, distinctive, and with a tenacious, unrelenting focus on improvement and raising standards. But is this at a cost of them becoming more insular and inward looking, with less engagement in the wider community and consequently a more restricted and confined learning experience for children? Similarly, following the radically reduced role of local authorities, are schools losing a sense of connection with each other and outside agencies? The forging of new groupings and alliances may mediate against this but is there a danger that schools look no further than their particular partnership clique?

These concerns have particular resonance and implications for professional development. Over the last two decades we have charted within the pages of Professional Development Today the movement towards school-led, school-focussed professional development, linked to classroom practice and improving teaching and learning. However, has this been at the price of schools becoming more inward looking and drawing only on their own limited pool of resource and insight? This then is the focus of our current issue of PDT, or more positively it is on exploring ways schools can become more outward-facing.

## ■ ■ ■ Outward facing – inward enriching

Sara Bubb's opening article paints a vivid picture of the benefits of outward-facing schools. She refers to the context of the Sinnott Fellowship initiative in which

four cohorts of teachers and other school staff have spent time in outward-facing activities. These have involved “developing innovative external links and relationships to improve pupil aspiration and attainment” and “bringing the outside world into the classroom and connecting the school to the wider community”. She worries that the drive for never-ending improvement has indeed resulted in a potentially impoverished educational experience for children and limited professional development for teachers. She argues that “the trend towards in-house professional development and joint practice development means that many schools are becoming inward-facing” and that, similarly, federations, trusts and teaching school alliances can stop looking outside their own partnerships. By contrast we are given extensive insight into the gains to be made from outward facing work, including the intrinsic motivation of staff and students. In particular teachers spoke of a sense of empowerment and “the chance to use their own professional judgement with little bureaucracy or constraint”. But the article is not dewy-eyed in its own outlook. Hard questions are also asked about whether such activity is strategically led and guards against loss of focus on children's learning and well-being.

## ■ ■ ■ Telling stories and broadening horizons

Teachers being empowered and making sense of their work and development are also features of the article by David Hopkins and Wayne Craig. This is the final article in a series of three that have appeared in successive issues of PDT. They have explored ten theories of action which at whole school level enable teachers to do their work and at

teacher level create more effective and enquiring learning environments for children. In this article they particularly focus on the leadership strategies and necessary conditions needed to bring about this improvement. They describe in detail five conditions needed to secure the necessary change in culture but among these emphasise the school developing its own narrative of its improvement journey as being key. Telling one's improvement story is a potent strategy. It is seen as fundamentally powerful in acting like a dress rehearsal for doing the work itself, at both school and classroom level; it "not only gives students a chance to mentally practice what they will do, it also provides a clear path for the teacher to follow".

The HOW TO section of this issue explores further the outward-facing work of teachers. Alyson Boustead describes how she forged collaborative partnerships with a range of organisations in Manchester to establish a creative *Project Based Learning* curriculum for Year 9 students. Elsewhere in Lancashire, Caroline Molyneux relates how she promoted science within the wider community. Chris Bennett describes how he developed his school to be outward facing through working with outside agencies in setting up an alternative curriculum for pupils in a deprived area of the West Midlands. Caroline Saunders then explains how the development of a *Learning Together Outdoors* approach with vulnerable children and their families in Bognor Regis has ensured smooth transition from primary to secondary school. In all the contributions these practitioners reflect on their own experience and give HOW TO guidance to the reader.

### Understanding what works

Toby Greany addresses the conundrum that whilst "there is widespread agreement that research evidence can and should inform the thinking and practice of teachers and school leaders" there is apparent great reluctance, and even resistance, to them doing this in practice. In a searching article which explores how research and development can be more than just well-meaning rhetoric, he argues that even compelling large scale "what works" research needs to be contextualised and combined with practice-based knowledge. Indeed we have known this for some time. It echoes the importance of what Giambattista Vico in the 18<sup>th</sup> century describes as "the knowledge of actors

as against the audience, the 'inside story' as opposed to the outside vantage point". The article then goes on to examine in depth the issue of supply and demand: how to enhance the supply of high quality relevant accessible research and how to increase the demands for such evidence among busy practitioners. He argues that schools which strategically invest in a strategic and concerted approach to research engagement will foster a "learning culture in which staff work together to understand what works, when, where and why".

The second article in the research section is Sally Wilkinson's search to discover what professional development is effective in small rural primary schools. Working with eighteen schools she found that teachers' professional development needs were influenced by two major features – the multiple roles they have beyond the classroom as a consequence of being part of a small staff, and teaching mixed aged classes. She found that there were four forms of professional development that seemed to be helpful: multi session provision; local after school network meetings; whole staff development with other schools and peer coaching or lesson study with teachers from other schools. She concludes by considering the implications of moving more to structures involving federations, academy chains, and "licensed, school-led excellence networks".

The issue ends with a contribution from Dom Brockway and Merv Lebor on preparing teachers for disruptive or challenging students. They emphasise the power of enabling trainees to get feedback and ideas for dealing with difficult classes through talking about the scenarios in which they are currently involved. Intriguingly they model this approach themselves in the format of the article which is cast as a dialogue between the two authors. At the heart of the strategies they explore is the relationship between the teacher's sense of self and how they interact with students, and the vital importance of a stimulating learning environment. This resonates with the resounding theme of other articles - the need to provide creative, outward-facing opportunities which engage learners and broadens horizons.

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