

## **ADVANTAGES OF BEING PART OF THE POLYCENTRIC NETWORK**

Advantages of being part of the Polycentric Evaluation network were many and specifically related to:

### **1. Sharing of Expertise**

*The advantages are ensuring that the wealth and Knowledge and experience that we can call upon were the central focus is doing what's best for the children across West Belfast. We are all united in the fact that our children are extremely deprived. They come from the most deprived area in Britain... We are very much aware of the challenges that they face. They [Students] come from a baseline that doesn't exist, e.g. 80% of our children come from single parent families. We refer to the Network as a wraparound service because that is essentially what we are trying to provide.*

*The advantages are obvious in that you are talking to Principals and Deputy Principals and disseminating good practice within the Network. It is an excellent practice that we disseminate not just good practice, and it is interesting at a QA level to see what I would deem as excellent practice another Principal would see it as just being good. We have our meetings that are minuted, and there's an agenda, but there's a very clear focus to it. We have a clear focus on what we want to achieve as opposed to the previous generic meetings.*

*Collectively by being part of the network we can also share CPD initiatives. For example, enhancing middle management was something we wanted to improve in our school. So we invited a member of ETI in to talk about Middle Management, and we networked. Our Literacy, numeracy, SEN coordinators sat together, and part of it was how do you do this, what does it look like, and that was a springboard for where we are now because we realised that there's so much excellent practice around us and about us?*

### **2. Increased Collaboration among subnetworks**

Other interviewees had similar perspectives on the advantages of being part of a network. For example, one Principal stated that the isolation of management was reduced.

*It was an opportunity where a lot of new principals saw it as an opportunity to work together, and schools could no longer be working in isolation, and it was very important that schools could co-operate and work together to improve standards not just in our own schools but across schools.*

*We wanted to strengthen and share practice across our communities. Before this as a Principal, I felt as if I worked very much in isolation. However, I'm very excited by this new opportunity that's being provided.*

Moreover, because of the involvement of, e.g., the District Inspector (DI) and the West Belfast Partnership Board (WBPB), the process of collaboration among various networks that existed became more standardised, corporate and outcomes focussed.

*Initially, as new Principals of Primary Schools in the area we would have come together to discuss issues such as Health and Wellbeing, but now it has taken a greater streamlined focus through [name of DI] and the West Belfast Partnership Board. There's a significant need. For example, 27% of my children are on the SEN register, and my Free School meals is at 68% at the minute. So we wanted to give best life chances to our children and parents but also to disseminate the good work that is going on. So it was really about raising the bar across the board.*

*The positive aspect is the corporate aspect of West Belfast education and the recognition that there are big challenges such as social deprivation. However, we all have high aspirations for children in our schools and hopefully the corporate aspect of education can lessen the contextual aspect in which we teach.*

### **3. Improvements in education that could not have been achieved through traditional forms of single school inspection and collaboration**

There was also the realisation among members of the network that the quality of educational provision in certain areas such as links between *home and school* had reached a plateau of inertia that could only be improved through collective networking among practitioners.

*Well, we have all looked at evaluating lots of practice such as Collegiate book monitor and trusted colleague network. It would be interesting to find out how other schools are doing. Everyone is jumping off the cliff at the same time, and we're all leaving this whole model of book monitoring behind and the classroom observations. Now it is a much more mature approach. If this opportunity had not have been there, we'd still be going down the line of monitoring and evaluation.*

*If we keep on doing the same things we get the same results. For example, our book monitoring evaluations became very repetitive; our peer evaluations became very repetitive, and they were not really impacting to any degree. So I think with this model, you're trusting people more across the Network. For example, our school is sharing good teaching and learning across the Primary network but also across the whole of West Belfast.*

*There is now the reality that what we are doing in our schools is best shared. It is that idea of dropping a pebble into a river and creating a ripple, but ultimately that ripple will become a Tsunami. We are seeing this starting in our own school and spread out into other schools.*

*Also, another advantage is what's happening in schools between 9 and 3 is so dictated by what's happening outside of school between 3 to 9 and what's going on with families and communities and the more awareness that we have and the more communities and links across West Belfast it can only be an advantage.*

*The links between the Primary and Post Primary ALC are now really starting to develop. For example, I have a teacher who is now developing transition materials with a Post Primary school, and we have already spoken about the*

*opportunity to bring that further. Also, I think that teachers in the community need to be out seeing more practice in other schools and not going on a training course.*

## **EVIDENCE OF IMPACT**

According to one Principal, *There's a five-point mantra for any high performing school, and this should also apply to any network and its Transparency, comprehension, accountability, recognition and improvement. Everybody needs to be involved, and there is a willingness to learn. There is also a need to see improvement.* Taking into account these overarching themes and the recommendations arising from the Area Inspection report, one participant referred to an increase in the dissemination of best practice as evidence of impact. *The Area Evaluation that occurred in 2009. It has taken a long time to come to this point, and I think that you can see the effects of it now because one of the things the AI [Polycentric Inspection] talked about was the dissemination of good practice.*

Evidence of impact also related to improvements in Transition arrangements, externally devised assessments and an increase in the number of students entering the works force and third level education.

*Transition was an area we were asked to look at. So for the Primary ALNC, we put together a resource for Nursery teachers together with WBPB on what is required for a smooth transition to Primary Schools. We also put together a set of Lessons that our Teachers deliver to incoming parents. There are five lessons on literacy and numeracy, for example, the importance of syllables, early recall, basically how they [parents] can help their children to be better at Literacy and Numeracy. Other areas are looking at this stating that they would love this in their schools.*

*The standards in WB have risen dramatically over the last few years, so we must be doing something right not just as leaders or teachers or Pastoral structures because we are sending more children to University, we have more children leading directly to employment because of their qualifications. We are further developing links with employers and it is not just this schools, it is the schools in West Belfast and in the past, ten years ago, employers would not have wanted them.*

## **POWER RELATIONS WITHIN THE NETWORK**

For the primary ALNC, there appears to be very few power relations due to low stakes selection criteria. At primary level, selection is based on the parish boundaries [proximity to the school]. However, one Principal pointed out that in terms of academic selection, some students, in particular Girls in the area are at a disadvantage in that in order to get into the Girls Grammar School they require an A in the unofficial 11+ entrance test whereas some of the boys Grammar Schools will take boys with lower grades, so there is a slight disparity between the standards required for Girls entering their PP school of choice in comparison to boys. From this, selection criterion is then based on proximity to the school. Indeed, the issue of academic selection remained constant throughout the course of these case studies and particularly at Post Primary level.

*Your specific reference to the power relations. There's one specific power relation that we have here which is immense because it is the highest achieving school in NI and it has been in the top three schools for the last five years. So we are dealing with schools who are struggling to lift themselves from the bottom, and yet schools in the same area wearing a different colour uniform are exceptional.*

*The big issue with WB is where they draw from areas that are totally unrelated to WB, and yet the school is on the spine of the Falls road, and this has been highlighted on numerous times before. So when you look at it, they're still coming from the same area and the same challenges and the same hurdles that is nonsense I can assure you of that.*

*Whenever there's ten bus loads brought in costing an enormous amount of money to the taxpayer because there's a rule that if you live three miles away from the school, you're entitled to a free bus pass but we are one of the few schools where the kids walk to school every day. We do not need buses, we do not need Taxis, and we do not need that added expense to the taxpayer.*

Regarding recommendations arising from the AI, participants also stated that if one leaves aside the 11+ transfer examination:

*When you are not comparing like with like there will always be that competitive edge and one of the things we had to overcome as leaders was the acceptance that schools had to be willing to display and to show. They had to be willing to display and to showcase what did work and what didn't work. I would refer to it as co-operation and openness between the schools.*

*They will share their quality expertise and strategies with all of the schools in West Belfast. They had one there only recently, the VP one and we were introducing a QA structure in all of the schools, and they already had one and the QA process that they had to oversee effectiveness and efficiency, it was absolutely brilliant.*

Unintended Power relations were also appeased through strategic planning and the monitoring and distribution of leadership activities by organisations such as the West Belfast Partnership Board.

*Most of what we are trying to achieve are above and beyond the remit of the Principal. However, the role of the Principal is about selling it to staff and asking them what the staff are going to get out of it professionally. From within the Network, one school will take the lead on a particular issue that we are trying to achieve. The chair is also alternated, but one of the key players that ensure distribution of roles is the West Belfast Partnership Board who give us space and support and keeping us right at meetings and to stop us from going off on a tangent. They also act as a conduit of information for all the learning networks and brings it all together. It is very much a table of equals.*

*Too often many initiatives come and go and fall off the band wagon as a result of goodwill fatigue and schools are left trying to find other ways of keeping the show on the road. This is to my mind is the crux of the whole program. Someone needs to*

*have a strategic overview of this and how much society will benefit from all of this. This is going to have huge legacy impacts.*

*WB Partnership board have a part to play in piecing it together – Maybe Preschool and Nursery.*

*We do have massive support from the WB Partnership Board. They are a cornerstone for us. They know the difficulties that all of our schools have, but they also know some of the acute difficulties that some of our schools have.*

## **ROLE OF THE INSPECTORATE IN THE POLYCENTRIC NETWORK**

The inspectorate was seen as being crucial to the effectiveness of the network among all participants. However, participants were also of the view that in the absence of organisations such as the West Belfast Partnership Board, inspectors should be more involved in the process.

*We would like to see the inspectorate more involved in the process. That is understandable as ETI are under so much pressure allocated to doing school inspections. It is the layer above these people that needs to ensure that DI's are free and given the opportunity to be much cognisant of what's going on. There's a variation of frequency that's required. We need to see more of our inspectors in a non 7-year cycle, and that needs to be more of an ongoing basis in the school.*

*It is [the area inspection] actually so long ago now which is a shame but we are aware of it, and it would have been shared at the time with Governors, etc. In terms of informal feedback yes, there was continuous feedback from the DI who has since retired. Now no, we do not get a lot of feedback from the Inspectorate. Now the big hook for us as Primary Principals in 2014 was when we met in St. Mary's, and we saw how results had improved at Post Primary level.*

*If there was a bit more joined up strategic thinking between school inspection reports and Polycentric inspection reports, then this would have a great impact. In other words, the outcomes from individual inspections need to reflect Polycentric inspections. Also, Polycentric inspection will not work if it is a directive. It needs to be more of an appreciative inquiry as opposed to this hard hitting model.*

On the other hand, the absence of a rigid monitoring framework for inspection was also seen as having a positive unintended consequence with one participant stating: *'The fragility of Polycentric anything is whether or not schools want to do it or not. You cannot impose this model of evaluation outcomes on anyone'*. This perspective resonates with another participant who also stated: *'uniquely in West Belfast we have a Nursery, Primary, ALNC and the Post Primary ALC. Also, it is important for the network to grow naturally rather than have something contrived which is what happens when most networks fail'*.

In summary, therefore, participants were of the view that, although Polycentric Evaluation has catalysed the quality of education provided in West Belfast; for future iterations of Area inspections (if they do occur), there needs to be a different focus on what aspects of education to inspect within the area. Moreover, and most significantly, the ETI needs to take a more proactive centralised role in follow-up polycentric evaluation activities as evidenced by the success of the Area Inspection of West Belfast and *Acta est Fabula, plaudite* [**The show is**

**over now applaud]** the absence of any significant improvements in other areas of Northern Ireland were follow-up area inspection did not occur.

*There needs to be a different focus. In other words, now that transition arrangements have been improved, we now need to look at other areas, in particular, Literacy, Numeracy and SEN provision across the area. What we would want the inspectorate to report is recognition and also areas for improvement both at a local and system level. In other words, what we would like to see is how other areas have improved, where they are at and what initiatives they have used to improve a certain aspect of quality in their area. Also, the DI needs to be used more effectively to guide the process. A follow-up network evaluation if you like. Our Area inspector should be our trusted colleague that guides the process. For example, when we were part of a Comenius project we met schools in France who stated that inspectors visit schools almost every week and they become trusted colleagues. It is the only way that this can work. A trusted colleague inspector who guides the process.*