

Draft paper - R U up 4 this? A proposal for developing practitioner knowledge from *Achievement for All* using 21stC ICT professional tools

Marilyn Leask, Brunel University with Sonia Blandford, TeachFirst; and Christina Preston, Mirandanet (Mirandanet.ac.uk)

Introduction

Achievement for All is a DCSF 'pioneering project which will raise aspirations for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)' (foreword, DCSF 2009 *Achievement for All: local authority prospectus.*). This DCSF local authority Prospectus (p.1, 2009) sets out three key aims for the *Achievement for All* programme:

- "to improve the achievement and progress of children and young people with SEND
- to improve the engagement of parents of children and young people with SEND with their schools; and
- to improve the wider outcomes of children and young people with SEND."

However the prospectus is light on how the rest of us in the education sector can learn from the work being done in the ten pilot local authorities. *Achievement for All* faces the same challenges in disseminating tested new knowledge and engaging the whole workforce in change as any other major national project:

- How can other stakeholders across the education sector tap into the ideas, ask questions and learn from the pilot authorities?
- How can those involved in these projects learn from what others are doing elsewhere?

Without harnessing the power of digital communication technologies, the costs of engaging the wider workforce in research outcomes which require changes in practice are astronomical. Perhaps this is why we have so many national pilot studies which stop at the pilot stage.

Of course there are databases where reports might be stored at the end of projects such as the SEN Portal (www.sen.ttrb.ac.uk) and no doubt some Teachers TV films will be made (www.teacherstv). However here are now innovative new ways of sharing knowledge during projects which are being taken up by other public sector organisations, that the education sector has as yet to optimize in a significant and industry growing way.

This paper proposes new ways of resolving the challenges of evolving practice across a national system through harnessing the potential of 21st century digital technologies to create a 'Facebook' type professional networking environment; supporting both knowledge sharing and building. What we call a *Society 21* approach – a way of working using 21st century tools to create a 21st century society.

What problem are we trying to solve?

The problem we are trying to solve is the long standing challenge of any national education system i.e. *how to provide access to new knowledge and effective continuing professional development (CPD) for a large and dispersed education workforce.*

In England one and a quarter million people work in the education sector and many other professionals are involved. In this paper we offer 21st century solutions to the following intractable problems:

- how can new knowledge about supporting the learning of children with SEND be generated effectively, tested and shared across the whole of the school workforce?
- how accessible is the evidence base underpinning established ways of working in the profession and what is the quality of the evidence?
- how can teachers access the knowledge they need to support individual pupils' needs at the time they need it?
- how can we access the knowledge that is held in the sector so that it is more widely available to all – LAs staff, CPD and ITT staff, school staff, trainee teachers, parents, young people, OFSTED, policy makers, OFSTED and charities?

The National Association for Special Needs NASEN (www.nasen.org.uk) has identified more than 50 distinct areas of SEND knowledge that teachers may require at some point in their careers. All mainstream teachers (regardless of experience) and special needs coordinators (SENCOs) need to be able to access knowledge about effective teaching for different forms of SEND in inclusive classrooms.

In our teaching careers and in our personal and family lives, from time to time we have needed to access expert knowledge in many of these areas and not always found it easily available. It is this lack of access to the knowledge teachers need, at the time of need and in a format that is practitioner-friendly that has inspired and prompted us to develop the **Society21** concept. The knowledge teachers need to support children with SEND is not necessarily in the form of **explicit knowledge** published in lengthy articles or books. Much is in the form of **tacit knowledge** held in the heads of experienced teachers, local authority colleagues or academics and other stakeholders.

The **Society21** approach proposes online professional 'communities of practice' or networks to provide two way communications which provide practitioners with:

- access to tacit knowledge linking schools, local authorities, universities, unions and other experts, services and agencies in order to bridge the gap between theory and practice through evidence based resources
- ways for existing and new special needs coordinators (SENCOs) to engage in dialogue regardless of distance beyond current online forums
- a communal problem solving and sharing good practice network that thrives on reflective practice
- a methodology that promotes collaborative approaches to research and reaching judgments on evidence (the PIMMS approach – **p**ractitioners and researchers working in a community of practice and using **i**nnovative 21C **m**ultidimensional mind-**m**apping as well **s**tandard techniques for ideas sharing, research and

evaluation. This way of working provides a 'green-house' for knowledge sharing, knowledge creation and testing ideas with peers and experts.

- stakeholder engagement in the sharing and developing of a 'knowledge economy'.

Where such networks are addressing national concerns, moderators need to be available online to develop and manage the services outlined above. Many companies already use this approach as part of the company's knowledge management strategy.

What might we learn from other sectors about knowledge management?

Our proposal is based on what other public and private sector organisations are doing to use ICT tools to support easy access to best practice and on good practice emerging from the education sector.

There are many resource banks which provide access to articles and books for those who have the time to study an area in depth (e.g. www.sen.ttrb.ac.uk, www.eep.ac.uk). However explicit knowledge published in traditional forms is not what we are considering here. We are proposing a 'knowledge dynamic' that is fluid and expansive and that can be crystallized to specific challenges professionals faces in their day to day work.

The following are two examples of knowledge management approaches in other sectors which are designed to give easy access to the knowledge practitioners need at the time of need:

- **online professional networking:** You may have heard of Facebook (www.facebook.com) an **online social networking** site but what have you heard about **online professional networking**? Local government employees in England, Scotland and Wales are provided with an online professional networking environment to enable them share knowledge and collaborate with colleagues with similar responsibilities regardless of location. Currently, this 'Facebook' type site for local government (www.communities.idea.gov.uk) links 41,000 local government staff through over 920 communities with more than 100 joining every day.

We invite you to consider whether something similar for the education sector might help us all as practitioners as well as parents and children.

The provision of software which links discrete communities and allows participants to find others like themselves or experts in areas they wish to learn about has necessarily to be undertaken by a body with some responsibility for coordinating work in the relevant sector. Teachers in a recent research project we undertook for Becta on ICT tools for future teachers asked why there wasn't an online community of practice environment for teachers like the one for local government on www.communities.idea.gov.uk.

- **Knowledge Pathways:** the Map of Medicine' (<http://www.mapofmedicine.com/>) was initially developed by those training doctors to answer the questions raised

by trainee doctors. The approach provides routeways through a validated evidence base to answer questions drawn from questions faced in practice. The pages are designed to be accessed via hand held devices so the knowledge is easily accessed in the field. The NHS pays a subscription to provide free access to NHS staff. The starting point is a specific practitioner concern/query rather than a general problem or research question; as is the case with many traditional forms of publication. Some local authorities have already developed such pathways in order to work more closely with other agencies. A number of students and staff at Brunel university are developing models of this approach. Pathways can link with audio and video material, mind maps, scenarios, traditional forms of evidence, case studies and so on.

It is suggested that developing and managing a provision of this nature would be best managed as a separate non-commercial entity; away from any government or political influence. This may help to ensure long-term sustainability and impartiality. It would also make explicit specific roles of responsibility and accountability. This type of approach also gives autonomy to the learner as learning can take place both in 'real time' and 'dedicated' time. The learner chooses the level of engagement, but also the methodology, thus supporting the 'professional well-being' of practitioners (Devi 2009, nasen AGM)

What are our proposals?

New models of professional development are vital if all teachers are to keep up to date and provide the best possible service to pupils and their parents and communities.

As we highlighted in an open letter in the Times Educational Supplement to Michael Gove, the shadow secretary of state for schools (October 2009),

“Traditional models of teacher training will never reach the mass of teachers. Face to face models reach few even if schools and local authorities can find genuine ‘experts’: numbers of teachers are high so the cost of face to face updating for all is out of the question, teachers’ lives are too busy and much of the kind of knowledge teachers need to improve their practice on a daily basis is fine grained and focused on particular concerns of the moment. Yet regular updating of teacher knowledge and skills is essential.”

We propose that the **Society21** approach provides a two-way communications network linking initial teacher training with continuing professional development and bringing together educators and policy makers from the range of roles and agencies across the education sector. Evidence from the local government online communities of practice initiative (www.communities.idea.gov.uk) (Leask, 2009) shows the significantly increased impact initiatives such as **Achievement for All** can achieve with this way of working which includes ensuring representation from every relevant organization in the community and a monthly round up newsletter as well as webinars, pod casts and so on.

An online communities of practice environment to encourage sharing of knowledge in order to better support pupils with specific SEND and raise standards in the education

sector would provide a backbone for national connections between specialist interest groups and peer challenge in specialist communities.

As a nation we accept the need to invest in the motorway infrastructure to provide a backbone for national connections between geographical communities, what about a national virtual infrastructure for teachers?

What needs to happen next?

Experience from other sectors is that some technical and administrative national infrastructure and coordination is all that is needed as well as funds for publicity, and then teachers', teacher trainers', student teachers', local authority advisory teachers' enthusiasm will do the rest.

We are undertaking a survey to establish how teachers currently access the knowledge they need in SEND and what provision would help them including the provision outlined above. You are invited to email us at society21@brunel.ac.uk by January 31st 2010. We look forward to receiving your views and input.

Marilyn Leask



Marilyn Leask is a professor of education at Brunel University. She was previously Head of Knowledge and Learning at the Improvement and Development Agency for local government (www.idea.gov.uk) and Head of Effective Practices and Research Dissemination at the Training and Development Agency for schools (www.tda.gov.uk). She is an expert in national change and knowledge management as well as teacher education and the use of ICT for continuing professional development. She co-edits the most popular text book and text book series for teacher training: the Routledge Learning to Teach in the secondary school series. She recently reviewed and proposed developments for the SEN Portal www.sen.ttrb.ac.uk.

Sonia Blandford



Sonia Blandford is founding Executive Director of Teach First and has extensive experience as an education practitioner in a range of settings including Pro-Vice Chancellor (Dean of Education) at [Canterbury Christ Church University](#) (2002 - 2007), leading one of the largest providers of initial and continuing professional education in the UK. As author of over twenty books and manuals she has a range of research interests including education leadership, professional development and community education

Christina Preston



Christina Preston is the Founder and Chair of the international MirandaNet Fellowship established in 1992. The MirandaNet Fellowship was established in response to a need expressed amongst teachers for a supportive community of peers who would mentor each other in the exploration of ICT potential in teaching and learning (www.mirandanet.ac.uk).

Anita Devi



Special thanks go to Anita Devi for her input and advice. Anita Devi is currently lecturing part-time at The University of Northampton. She is a member of the nasen advisory board. As an Education Consultant Anita works with a variety of stakeholders and has a specialist interest in learning and cognition and the use of digital technologies to enable, assist and support all aspects of learning.