LEADERSHIP for LEARNING
The Cambridge Network

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
Faculty of Education

InForm 18

Flattening the Hierarchy:
the role of student agency in school improvement

Stephanie Hill   **December 2017**

InForm's purpose is to capture significant ideas that enhance our understanding of leadership, learning and their interrelationship.

This InForm is based on research by Stephanie Hill, a recent MEd Educational Leadership and School Improvement student at the University of Cambridge, and Associate Assistant Principle and Senior Pedagogy Leader at Passmores Academy in Harlow, England - a secondary school for students aged 11 - 16.

Steph created a student learning community (SLC) in her secondary school prior to undertaking her MEd. The students, whose numbers have now grown to 28, have taken different roles but have all been engaged in dialogue with teachers and in leading twilight professional learning sessions for teaching staff. A group also joined a research day at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, and a poster presentation by at the BELMAS (British Educational Leadership Management and Administration Society) 2016 conference. The vision for this work was drawn from her research into the value of teacher learning communities (TLC) within schools (Stoll & Fink, 1996; Hargreaves, 2010), which focused on the connections that are made within schools, between teachers, between teachers and students, between the students themselves, and among all stakeholders in an organisation.

For her MEd thesis, Steph questioned whether the positive impact that the SLC appeared to be having upon teaching and learning within her school was real or tokenistic. Specifically, it examined whether a SLC model of student agency could be a meaningful and sustainable model for school improvement. In this InForm, Steph explains what a student learning community is, details how it developed in her school, and highlights a selection of key findings and recommendations as a result of her research.

Steph concludes by inviting you to make contact with her to share your experiences of student agency initiatives and to explore possible future collaborations.

More information is available at: www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/lfl/about

What is a Student Learning Community (SLC?)?

The SLC model is a means through which students can collaborate, discuss and reflect upon the learning in lessons and across the school, with the specific purpose of making their learning more meaningful and engaging. It aims to provide a purposeful metaphorical and physical space (Fielding, 2001a) in which teachers and students can engage in dialogue about learning using their own language, rather than the prescribed language of performativity or teaching practice frameworks.

The SLC model was introduced as an innovative way to support the leadership team in developing quality learning at Passmores Academy and to develop the school as a learning organization (Senge et al., 2012). The SLC vision was drawn from theory on the value of professional learning communities (PLC) in school improvement, student voice and agency, professional dialogue, along with theory concerning learning organisations.
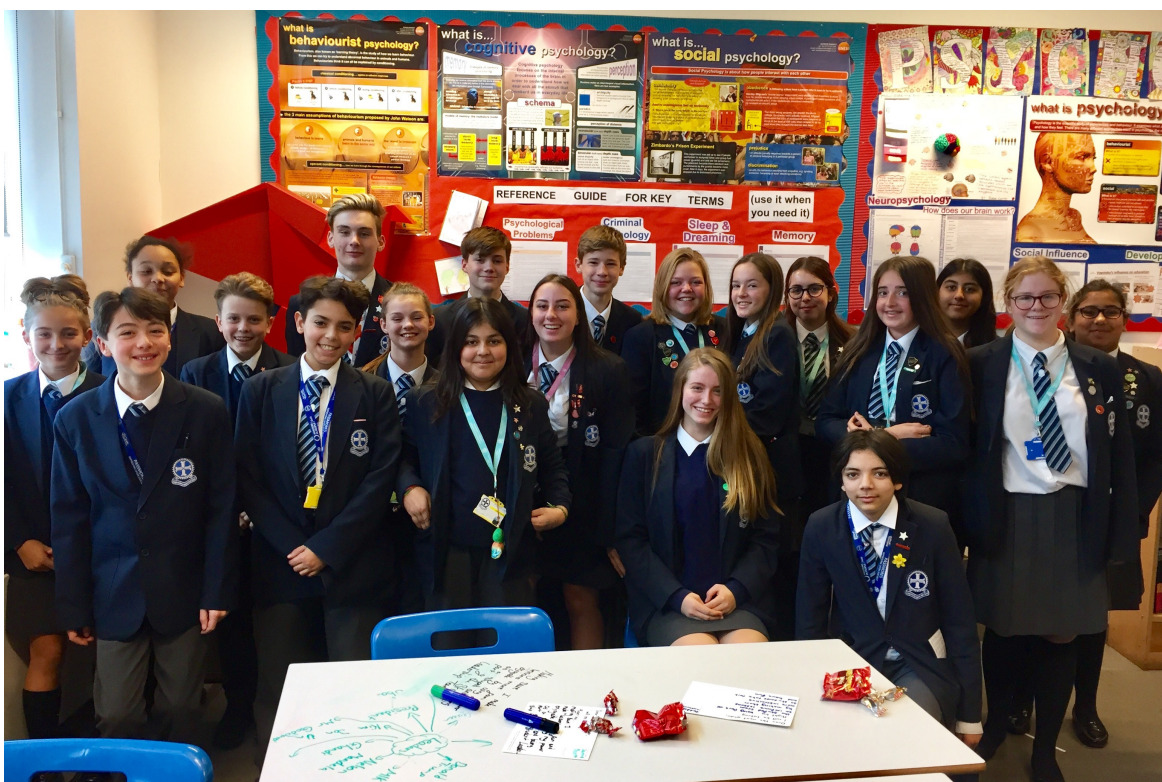
Some of the students from the current Student Pedagogy Team

The development of the SLC in a school context

In practice, the SLC, called the Student Pedagogy Team (or what the students referred to as the StuPed Team) at Passmores, has evolved over five years in response to reflections and feedback from both students and staff within the school. In this time the SLC has contributed to changing

the professional culture of the school by encouraging the mutual learning of students and teachers and providing spaces where teachers and students can discuss learning in practical and dynamic ways. Members of the team have also visited other schools and presented at conferences, providing opportunities for them to learn from others outside their school community and to contribute to the broader conversation about the improvement of education. For instance, during the Leadership for Learning seminar: Students as Agents in Pedagogical Change, held at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, students discussed with educators and academics the significance of student feedback in the improvement of teaching and learning, and their role in these processes.

Notably, the SLC from its outset was aligned with the newly appointed Pedagogy Team - a group of five Pedagogy Leaders who were classroom teachers with an interest and expertise in developing teaching and learning within the school. This provided an existing distributed leadership structure that encouraged a bottom-up approach and offered a fitting platform for the involvement of student leaders.
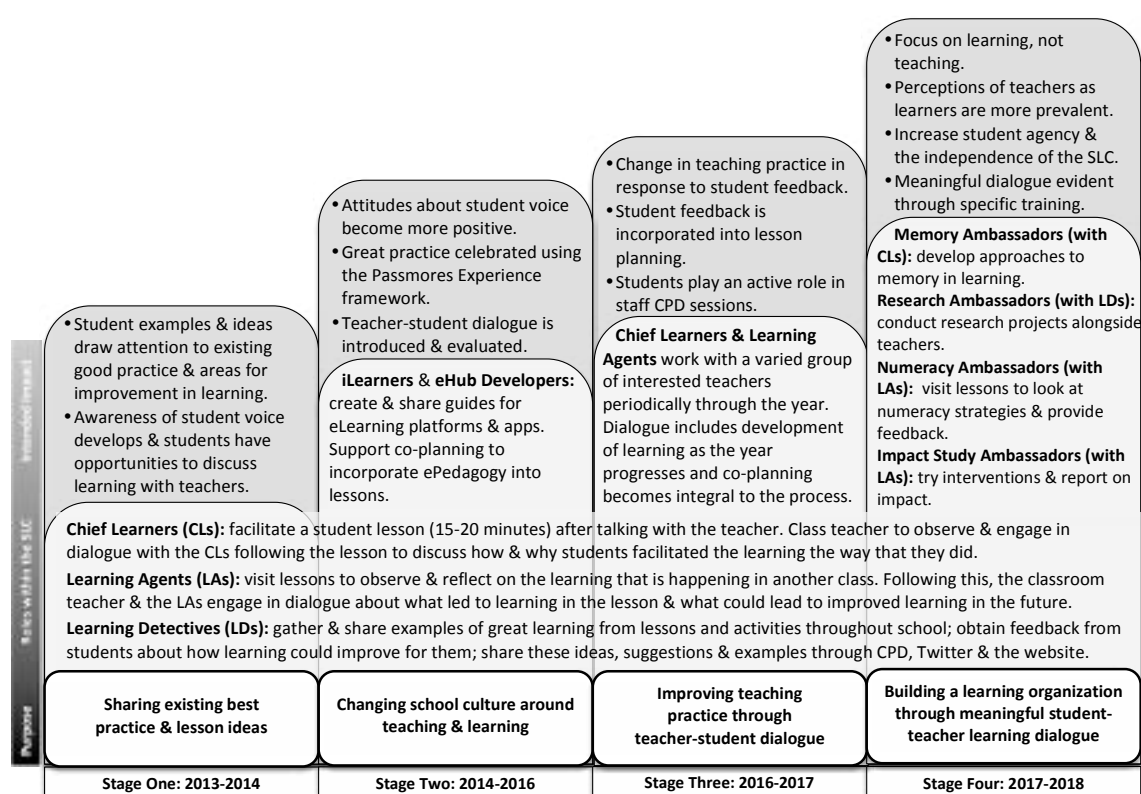

Diagram of the development of the SLC

Over the last first five years we have learnt much about the use of a student agency model in our school. We developed an application process for the team that aims to strike a balance between self-selection and teacher invitations to ensure that members are intrinsically motivated to contribute but that varied perspectives are also represented. We have learnt that having a clear

description and purpose for each role, negotiated by students, is crucial; this allows students to focus their involvement in the team and share their ideas in a more structured manner through individual teacher-student dialogue, by adding to the school's Teaching & Learning website (www.passmoresfalcon.com) and social media, and by engaging in staff CPD sessions and conferences. These roles (see diagram below), organically evolved in line with the school's improvement foci and more specifically, with the focus areas within departments and for individual teachers. In this respect, we found it more effective for students in the team to work closely with nominated departments in co-planning. Within their particular roles, by assigning students to a specific group of self-selecting staff across a full year, students could see the impact of their contributions and develop meaningful learning relationships.
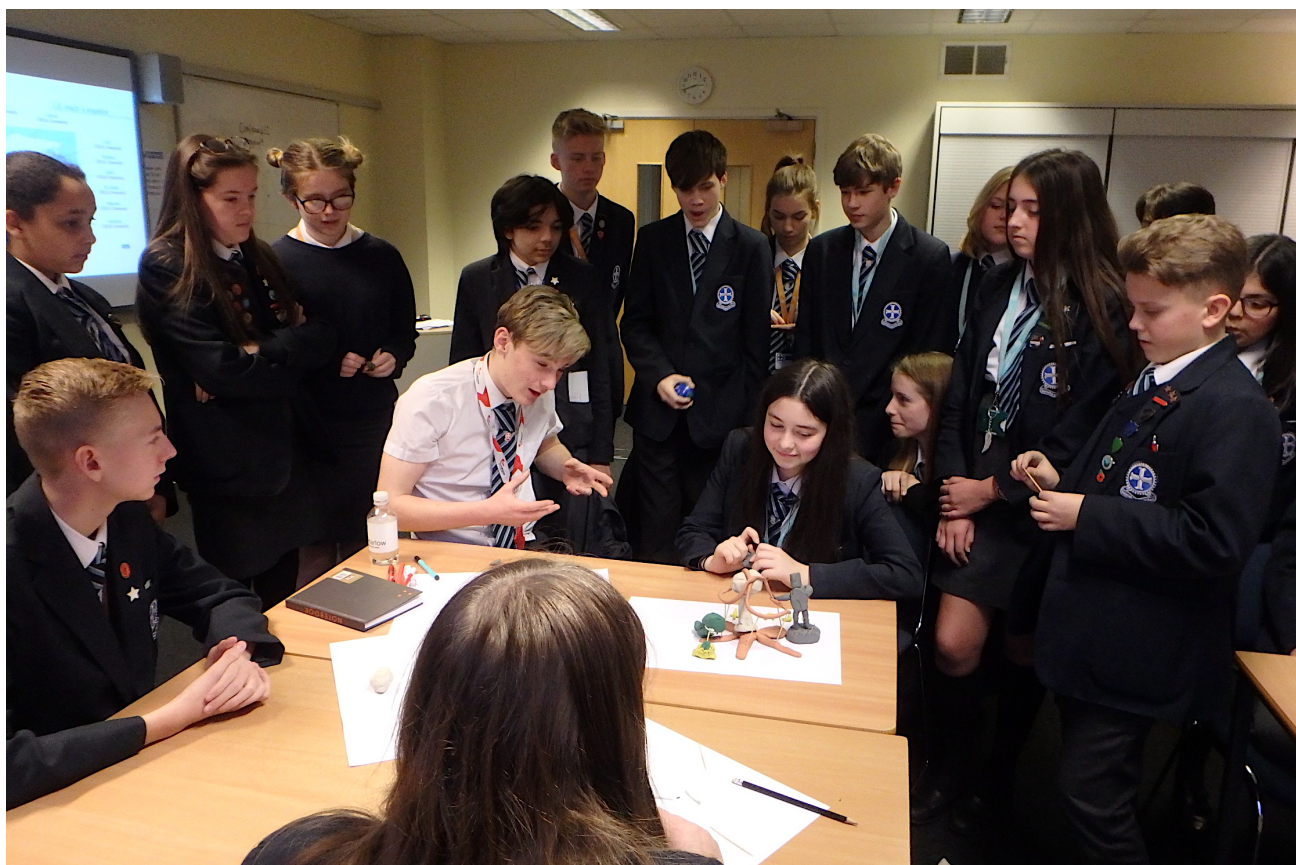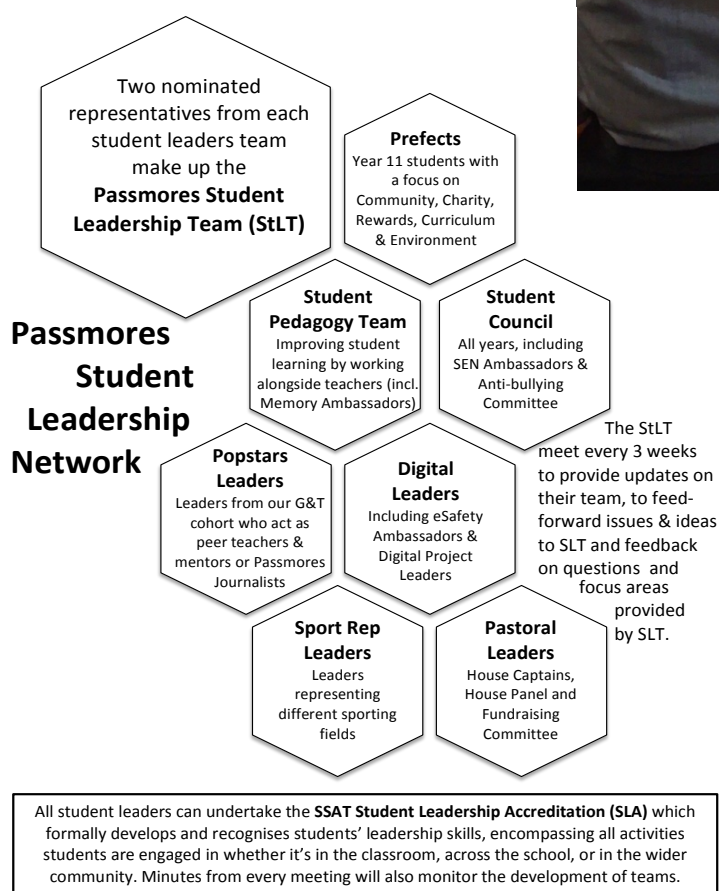

Students discussing their concepts of learning at their annual Student Leadership Summit

The team play an integral role in our Professional Learning (CPD) programme within school. For example, in one session students explained the findings of a student learning questionnaire they had conducted across a sample of the student body and then engaged in a Q&A session to clarify interpretations, elaborate upon the findings and provide further ideas and considerations for staff concerning the quality of learning in our school. However, we learnt that the success of their role in CPD and in learning relationships with teachers hinged upon our ability to provide them with

specific training in dialogic skills (e.g. asking meaningful learning questions), leadership, and the use of social media for learning. As such, the team meets every fortnight to engage in 'bitesize' leadership sessions and to discuss their progress. The current student team also had the opportunity to spend a day at the Faculty of Education for a Student Leadership Summit, where they finalised their vision and mission statement, and engaged in workshops on developing professional dialogue and learning from and contributing to the LfL Network.

Leah explaining to a teacher at the Passmores TeachMeet which strategies and activities work for students in building resilience and deeper learning.

Two nominated representatives from each student leaders team make up the **Passmores Student Leadership Team (StLT)**

Prefects
Year 11 students with a focus on Community, Charity, Rewards, Curriculum & Environment

Passmores Student Leadership Network

Student Pedagogy Team
Improving student learning by working alongside teachers (incl. Memory Ambassadors)

Student Council
All years, including SEN Ambassadors & Anti-bullying Committee

Popstars Leaders
Leaders from our G&T cohort who act as peer teachers & mentors or Passmores Journalists

Digital Leaders
Including eSafety Ambassadors & Digital Project Leaders

The StLT meet every 3 weeks to provide updates on their team, to feed-forward issues & ideas to SLT and feedback on questions and focus areas provided by SLT.

Sport Rep Leaders
Leaders representing different sporting fields

Pastoral Leaders
House Captains, House Panel and Fundraising Committee

All student leaders can undertake the **SSAT Student Leadership Accreditation (SLA)** which formally develops and recognises students' leadership skills, encompassing all activities students are engaged in whether it's in the classroom, across the school, or in the wider community. Minutes from every meeting will also monitor the development of teams.

Importantly, the current SLC sits within a larger student leadership model at the school in order to increase visibility of our student leaders, to enhance student agency and encourage self-responsibility and accountability (see adjacent diagram). Every student team has two student leaders who sit on the Student Leadership Team (StLT) and attend meetings every three weeks to provide updates on their progress, feed forward issues and concerns to SLT and feedback on questions and discussion topics from from SLT.

Students discussing at a BELMAS conference in 2016.

Research

The case study on the SLC, conducted from February through to April 2015 as part of the MEd Educational leadership and school improvement (ELSI) course, questioned whether the positive impact the team appeared to be having upon teaching and learning within our school was sustainable and whether it could, in fact, be tokenistic. Specifically, it examined whether a SLC model could be a meaningful and sustainable model for school improvement.

Presented here is a selection of the key findings and recommendations from the case study, drawn from a survey and semi-structured interviews using a of student and teacher participants involved in the SLC process.

### Honest and Authentic Awareness of What Works

Students demonstrated an honest and pragmatic awareness of what works in the classroom. It was also found that the depth of insight that occurs when teachers and students discuss shared experiences of teaching and learning can lead to meaningful pedagogical improvement.

Discussion surrounding 'methods to teach students effectively' featured as the most prevalent focus during the dialogue sessions and all participants agreed, or strongly agreed, that the ideas and suggestions discussed were valuable in their own practice. What emerged from responses was that the ideas were not frivolous or idealistic, as one might have thought to be the tendency in these situations; instead they were honest and pragmatic and accompanied by mature reasoning.

As Mrs. Kay reflected, "they avoided saying things like 'sit with friends'...they were honest about what happens, they were aware of what happens", and as Sarah recounts, during the dialogue they discussed "the importance of interesting starters to engage students in learning before the lessons begin as well as the importance of plenaries, so that students recognise what they have learnt".

In cases where the ideas could be considered idealistic, students usually included ideas for tangible teaching strategies: "expanding solo taxonomy into different subjects and making sure that different learning styles are used throughout all subjects so that everyone has a chance to learn" (Tom). Additionally, as teacher, Mr. Smith commented, "I didn't know how aware they were of what they liked...(their ideas) were not idealistic but realistic". In some cases, teachers indicated that they had already made changes to their practice based upon the event, as Miss Clark reflected, "I have already changed my seating plans as a result". Crucially, the foundation appears to be on equitable partnerships between teachers and students; that, in this case, have enabled students to communicate ideas that work for them, and consequently provided teachers with actionable and proven suggestions for pedagogy.
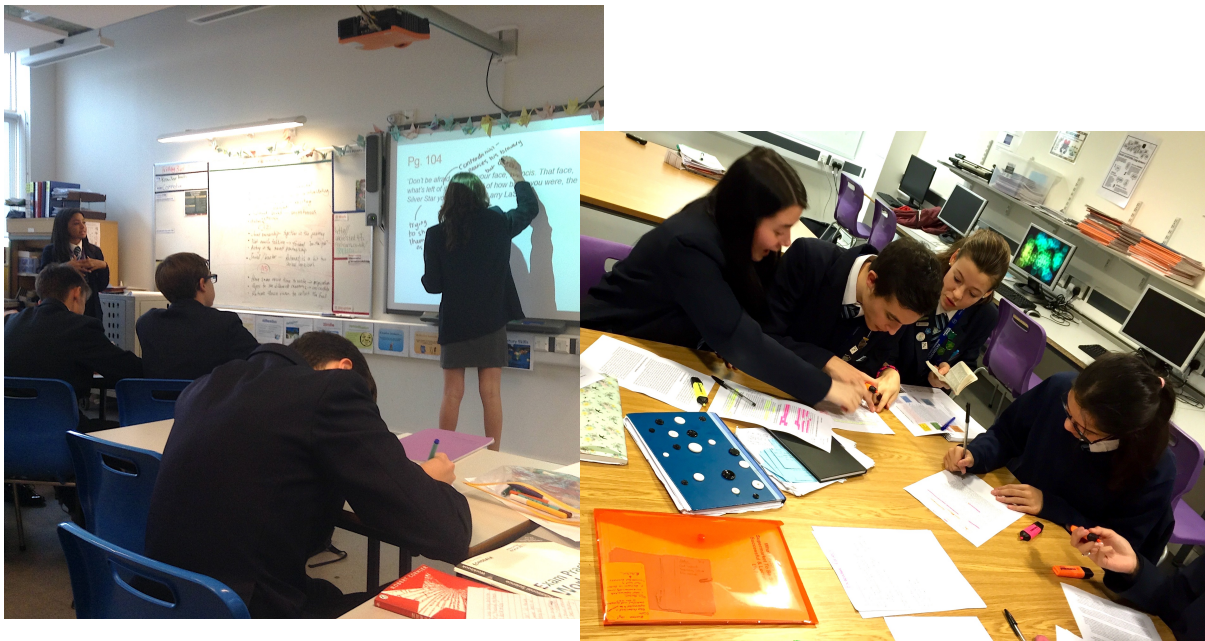
Members of the Chief Learners, a team within the StuPed Team who plan and deliver short lessons in different subjects across the school.

We found that there was value for the teachers in students demonstrating their ideas through student lessons: "the students used SOLO to plan/deliver the main activity of the lesson. I have never used this in my teaching before, but I will certainly give it a try" (Mr. Saye). Several teachers indicated a desire to observe students demonstrating their teaching and learning

ideas in the future, as this enabled them to see these ideas in practice, and evaluate the reaction and progress of the class. Even in instances where lessons provided little insight into new ideas, as Mrs. Spark commented "it was slightly useful although I had hoped that the students would offer ideas that I had not previously tried", the act of watching different styles and interpretations of learning led to the teacher reflexivity that is central to pedagogical improvement. Moreover, Mr. Saye noted that students often made "rookie mistakes" in their lessons but they were still happy to pursue ideas and strategies that they believed would improve learning. Much of the criticism of student agency initiatives centres upon the belief that teachers are qualified professionals and students cannot contribute to teaching practice with any level of expertise. Yet it emerged from the research that improving the practice of teaching necessitates teachers also seeing themselves as learners. Hence, students in their lessons did not assume the role of an expert in content, but could offer a way to change reticent teaching practice; for if students are willing to try new strategies and ideas even though they risk making mistakes, then it encourages teachers to do the same.
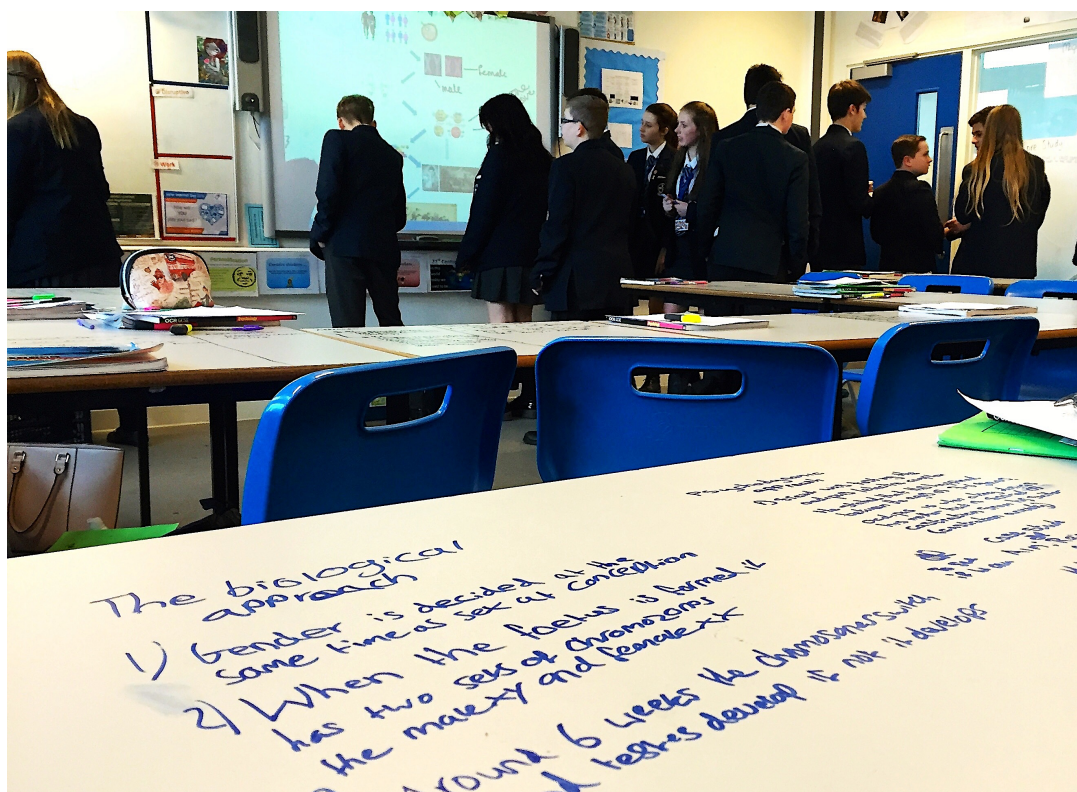
Students move around the room adding to study charts about theories in psychology as part of a student-led lesson.

Finally, the results showed that students embraced the notion that they were breaking new educative ground. They recognised that their ideas were beyond the current pedagogical boundaries of some teachers, yet welcomed the opportunity to assist teachers in transgressing

these limits: "...we were able to show and share our teaching ideas with staff even if they were different" (Daniel). Interestingly, the word 'different' was identified in the student word cloud during an interview with Robert: "students identify that they want to learn differently". Student responses showed that they saw the differences in their ideas as valuable and liberating, rather than restrictive, as May explained, "students were able to discuss with the teachers about what we see as great learning and they took away points which could broaden their teaching styles".

It is clear from this that the SLC viewed themselves as agents of change because of their ability to contribute new pedagogical ideas, yet they also identified that they were on a learning journey with teachers. As Robert concluded "now that (teachers) have embraced technology, they are able to come up with ideas that are more inclusive...there are more ideas from teachers about iPads than students... it is important that they are coming from teachers as well". And May explained how the experiences could enable them to learn together: "(how we) could approach the (student) teaching differently and adapt the way we teach and how as teachers they could change their teaching styles to appeal to a wider range of students".

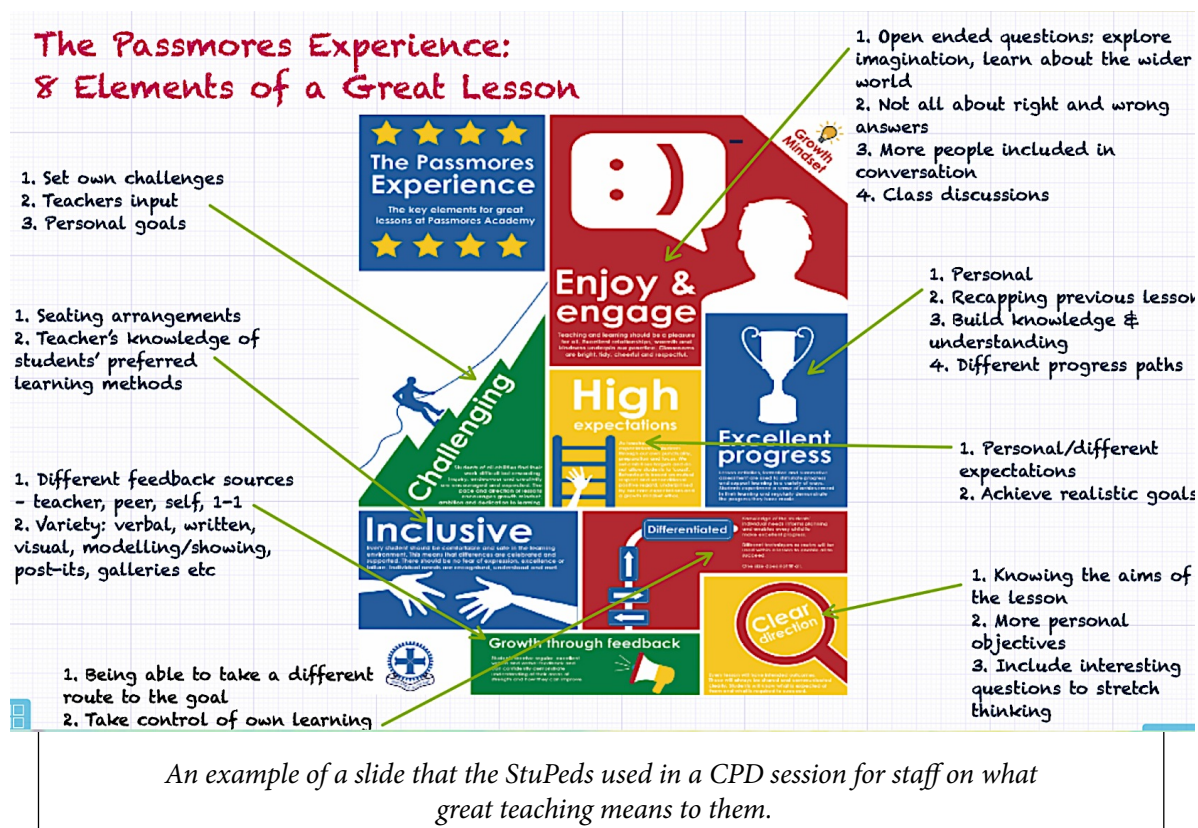**Transgressing Uncertain Ground to Build Self-confidence**

Initial uncertainty and nervousness existed and mostly stemmed from a lack of structure during dialogic encounters. However, by providing a shared space, which challenged individuals to overcome inhibitions and insecurities, most teachers and students developed self-confidence that could positively impact pedagogy across the school.

Most participants expressed the fact that they entered the events feeling unsure and lacking confidence, 'daunted' by the experience, describing it as 'nerve-racking', 'different and strange'. Nevertheless, students were willing to be in the uncertain space created by the SLC model whilst recognising that building confidence within this space may take time.

Markedly, students who participated in the student lesson articulated more confidence in offering ideas than those participating in the student observation, which could reveal that students found it more intimidating when the focus is on the teacher. Teacher participants expressed uncertainty that appeared to be linked to the absence of prescribed outcomes and guidelines for the dialogue session. This could reflect the fact that teachers have become so constrained and habitualised by inflexible processes within education that it has become challenging to communicate with students outside of that structure. Yet responses also showed that these experiences are more likely to lead to a development, rather than a deterioration, in self-confidence, as individuals demonstrated a willingness to work through the uncertainty: "it was really weird at first but, after a few minutes, you kind of blend in and start to focus on the lesson and how it is being taught" (Emily). Subsequently, participants found that the experience had played a role in allowing them to recognise their own strengths, as May reflected, "it made me realise how confident I am in order to stand up to a class of around 30 students". And as Mrs. Kay happily expressed, "I am more confident within myself...at the time of talking to (the students), I was anxious...but overall I

have experienced increased confidence".

It emerged that the experience created a space for teachers and students that was both unpredictable and undefined for all involved. Yet in doing so, it challenged individuals to overcome inhibitions and insecurities, and willingly step into this shared space in the future, or to create collaborative learning spaces with other teachers and students. For example, Tom reflected: "I have become a bit more confident, having to talk to teachers, it then makes it easier to do this in the lesson. It makes me want to put my hand up more". As is also reflected in Sophie's observation: "If I had to answer this before I had done the observations I would have said 'no', but now that I have done it I would definitely feel comfortable talking to teachers about the teaching and learning".

An example of a slide that the StuPeds used in a CPD session for staff on what great teaching means to them.

Knowing Each Other: the Nature of Relationships Between Teachers and Students

Teachers and students considered that knowing students well was the foundation for valuable learning relationships. The study also showed that knowing each other through the act of making meaning during dialogic encounters enabled students and teachers to transgress language barriers and form meaningful ways of learning together.

Both teachers and students indicated in the qualitative findings that the SLC needed to know the

students in their lessons in more detail and, in doing so, showed that they valued the relationships that teachers build with each of their students. Yet, the quantitative data contradicted this, as it also appeared that teachers believed that 'developing positive relationships between teachers and students' was discussed often, whereas students showed that it was discussed only sometimes or rarely.

When seeking clarification of this through the interviews Mr. Smith suggested that students may not have the same implicit awareness of student-teacher relationships: "teachers think about that when planning a lesson, they consider relationships and differentiate for them... maybe students didn't understand... have awareness of how the process works". Yet this awareness does exist, as Tom explained, "students might not realise that it's (a) positive relationship, they might just see the teacher as someone they will be taught by... but students who have it benefit more and feel more comfortable in lessons". What is particularly clear in the final part of this comment is that the student understands relationships through an awareness of its impact; demonstrating that it may not be a lack of insight from students, but more likely, an indication of differences in the language used by teachers and students. As Robert explained:

...relationships for teachers are about having students in your class that enjoy what they're doing. For students, it is having someone to come to when you're struggling. A teacher who says 'get your work done but I'm here for you' versus not caring. For example, there is a lasting effect of a teacher's uncaring comment... it stays with students. Students who dislike a teacher won't listen as much.

This emphasised a challenge in bringing students into the process of school improvement through a SLC model, as they will articulate and understand learning in their own way, not through the established language that has been largely defined by adults. Subsequently, teachers and students knowing each other did not mean that they needed to speak using the same language; it meant that they needed a space to listen to each other so that they were able to make meaning together (Simkins, 2005). It went beyond having the same definition of relationships, but in knowing each other well enough to acknowledge what it meant to the other. As is evident in Mrs. Kay's description of the dialogue session: *....we talked about whether liking a teacher meant that you did well...that it shouldn't matter...but with an inspiring teacher you can go ahead in leaps and bounds, it's not a hindrance and can push you up.*

By sharing experiences within the classroom and then engaging in dialogue about these experiences, teachers and students were able to form meaningful insights about learning that were based upon a shared understanding, rather than the sharing of separate meanings.

The Role of Mutual Respect in Developing Meaningful Learning

In valuing student input and experience, the SLC model fostered student empowerment, as students felt respected and valued. The collegial transparency that emerged in some instances supported a mutual respect that enabled students to see and respect teachers in a more profound and meaningful way, leading them to support pedagogical improvement beyond the parameters

of the study.

It appeared that respect and trust underpinned the willingness of students to contribute: "I was with people I knew well and that I could bounce ideas off, and also because I know that our advice was valued" (Emily). At the same time, as Ben commented, being able to contribute consolidated this feeling of trust and respect: "I knew what (I) said was valued by the other students and the teacher from the lesson. I could trust them and felt comfortable with them so it made things easier to discuss". Hence, what emerged from the SLC model was a mutually reinforcing dynamic of respect and trust that was driven and sustained by its participants.

One unexpected outcome of the study was that student participants acknowledged a developed understanding of the challenges experienced by teachers, indicating that the student body is generally unaware of these complexities. As Robert explained, "students don't understand how much time teachers spend, it has opened my eyes a bit more on the planning. You spend an hour on a plan for each lesson, it is quite difficult to do". Moreover, Tom commented that, "seeing teaching styles and how teachers do things... get more insight into it. When there are misbehaving students, you can see how it affects others, you don't really see how much the lesson gets disrupted usually". Fundamentally, this insight encourages a sensitivity and empathy that enables the growth of respect and trust, in turn promoting a desire for quality learning from both teachers and students.

The dialogic encounters created a collegial transparency that welcomed another perspective on their education. This fostered a strong sense of mutual respect, enabling students to critically reflect upon themselves as learners, and teachers to acknowledge the value of developing student agency:

The opportunity to involve students in their teaching and learning experience must be explored and used to increase student attainment by offering them the opportunity to take ownership of their learning, by having the chance to influence the teaching and learning approaches and strategies that they experience. This leads to heightened levels of student motivation and engagement and decreases incidents of low-level disruption in the classroom by establishing a positive classroom climate that has been built on a mutual respect and rapport (Mr. Grange).

It emerged that the model could enable both teachers and students to see each other in a different light and, in doing so, offer an opportunity to develop mutual respect that has the potential to transform classroom dynamics and foster reflexivity for all.

The Shared Ownership of School Transformation

The involvement of SLCs in lessons and in dialogic encounters, on several occasions, led to a sense of shared responsibility for school improvement. Also, it was found that negotiating disagreement and difference during dialogue was imperative in enabling meaningful

pedagogical transformation.

Passmores students during a visit to Homerton College where they engaged in the Leadership for Learning seminar, Students as Agents in Pedagogical Change.

Most student participants expressed awareness that their involvement in the SLC can have value and be meaningful in improving pedagogy across the school. As Beth describes, "I have learnt (that) as students we make a valuable contribution to the teaching and learning environment". And Samantha gave a specific example of where she saw the impact of her advice: "the teacher said he would use our idea more and he has. Before he never used iPads, now we are using Kahoot. There has been a difference". In many cases, the model enabled students to see when their input was being acted upon and this led to a sense of ownership in the changes that were occurring in their school.

Students viewed their role in school improvement as stretching beyond the events of the study, as one student concluded, "I now know how classes are improved and it lets me talk to my own teachers about improving their own classes" (Daniel). Similarly, Cassie saw the study as

an opportunity to learn in order to contribute further: "this has been valuable for improving my learning as I am able to analyse lessons better and help to improve the teaching within the school". In expressing a desire to continue in these endeavours, students revealed that they felt a sense of ownership, not only in their own learning journey, but also in pedagogical improvement across the school. Notably, the openness and courage that many student participants modelled during the study had significant transformative power, as it impacted students and situations outside of the study. As Ben observed, "the (other) students now value our opinions more and we have developed new ideas on different ways of teaching".

It became evident that the dialogic encounters led teachers and students to develop a sense of shared ownership in the improvement of their school, as Mr. Grange reflected:

...from my experience, in this study, I feel that the benefits we could get from having an open-ended, meaningful dialogue with students about their teaching and learning should not be underestimated. Listening to the student perspective on their educational experience is often ignored and incorporating feedback from their experience of various teaching and learning strategies/approaches can only advance our pedagogical knowledge and, ultimately, increase student attainment by offering them a more inclusive learning environment that they can take part ownership of.

One of the most valuable findings of the study was the awareness by some participants that mutual learning comes as much from disagreement and difference, as from agreement and parallels. As Samantha described, "(the teachers) listened... some ideas they didn't agree with, there were things that they questioned, but that was good as it helped us as well". This is reinforced in Robert's assertion: "I didn't see it as disagreements, more like taking other people's ideas and discussing them". And as Mr. Grange noted, each person in the dialogue session "offered a different dimension to the conversation where differing ideas highlighted an alternative approach to a topic". Indeed, it is possible for diverse perspectives to converge for an aligned transformative agenda.

An Alternative to Traditional Accountability Measures

The SLC model can be seen as an alternative means through which teachers and schools could be made accountable to the expectations of teaching and learning in ways that encourage a collaborative growth that is invited not enforced. If the dangers of manipulating student agency are resolved, the SLC model could create more meaningful ways to engage in pedagogical improvement.

Generally, participants wanted to see the model continue as a cyclical process of self-improvement: "I would like to have the (StuPeds) involved at the planning stage, then we could plan together; I deliver; we evaluate the strategy and the delivery of the strategy and 'replan' as a result" (Mr. Watson). This was reinforced by Daniel's comment that "it could be improved by another observation later to see whether the plans have been put in place". The events driven by the SLC were seen as a joint means through which a lesson could be discussed and improvement

could occur collaboratively, as is evident in Miss Fryer's suggestion: "we could watch the IRIS video and discuss certain points in the lesson more strategically". This was distinctly different to traditional accountability measures, such as observations from external or internal observers, where teachers are judged using performativity frameworks and often left isolated after the feedback process. As Mrs. Kay noted, student observation enables more authentic and meaningful feedback on the learning within the classroom:

...students (in class) act differently with teacher observers, but not with student observers... for them, they see a lesson just like normal. It is more of a true reflection as I wasn't as nervous... whenever I'm observed I get very anxious... (but with student observers) it was massively different, a lot less intimidating... they realise that you're not a performing monkey... they understand.

This strengthens the possibility of these events being valuable in school improvement, as they enable a dynamic in which teachers feel at ease and more genuine insight into everyday classroom practice can occur. Additionally, by providing the space for the collaborative construction of meaning, dialogic encounters could enable accountability measures that are more meaningful than traditional measures of performativity.

The model also provided opportunities for quality teaching and learning to be celebrated. As Mrs. Kay commented, "they were very complimentary... but it was nice to have positive feedback". In many ways, accountability measures in schools have forgotten the power of positive feedback for teachers and, in focusing so much on what is not being done, these measures have drowned out the great things that are being done. As such, a SLC model could provide a means for improvement through dialogue that is both discursive and constructive, whilst also celebrating what is already great. In saying this, constructive dialogue requires a set of skills that enables more than the surface-level discussion. As Mrs Spark's comment explicates:

...students liked working in groups but did not have a clear idea about what it was they liked to do in groups. The students did not like writing...(but) we did not really have a clear idea about how to move forward here (as) both reading and writing are assessed via a written response.

In some cases, students were clear on their learning preferences at a superficial level, but had not reached a stage in the dialogue where they were problem solving. As such, there is a need to engage teachers and students in structured and ongoing dialogue training that takes a solutions-focused and problem-solving approach and enables students to offer contributions that are clear, meaningful, and foster a sense of confidence in all participants. As Mrs. Kay remarked, "if the students had more observation training, it would give me even more confidence in their judgments, they could come observe me every week". Notably, responses tended to reinforce the need for students to develop these skills: "teachers are aware of how to get valuable dialogue but not with students...need to look at how to introduce it" (Robert).

However, it is crucial that we distinguish between skills for engaging in dialogue and observation, and training that threatens the authenticity of student insights. There are inherent dangers of student involvement becoming a tool solely intended for accountability and organisational

improvement, where input from students "becomes the voice of the customer disciplining the teacher into the pre-ordained, imperfectly internalised competences of government edict and market responsiveness" (Fielding, 2001a, p.107). This sentiment was echoed by Mr. Watson's reflection: "(we need to) ensure that the (StuPeds) do not become like Ofsted inspectors potentially delivering the deus ex machina on a professional's work".

Concluding Comments

In the past, initiatives involving student agency have sometimes generated anxiety and fear, and it is hoped that the findings in this study and the development of the SLC at Passmores Academy demonstrates that these feelings often disintegrate quickly, in both teachers and students. The perceptions of participants in the study helped to elucidate the values and priorities that teachers and students hold, and emphasise the importance of including students in any conversations about education reform and school improvement, as they are capable and willing.

In many ways, the SLC model was born out of an awareness that our students should be central to any school improvement mechanism, but it was inspired by courageous and radical efforts that are occurring throughout the world. In particular, it aimed to fulfil a vision put forward by Fielding that details the foundations of a successful student agency model:

...purposes and aspirations, the touchstones of meaning-making... a framework of reflection, dialogue, disagreement and celebration enabled contributions from all ages and identities in ways which challenged traditional hierarchies within the context of an insistent, demanding mutuality. A range of voices... not only through the narratives of learning, but also through the leveller of laughter and the eagerness of exploration. And all through this ran the excitement of the unpredictable and the reassurance of shared responsibility (2009, p.513).

This can occur if we develop the confidence of a relatively small group of students who can become models for the practice of constructive dialogic encounters, and then enable the practice to grow organically from there to not only impact the school, but potentially other educators, organisations and even policy: "decades of calls for educational reform have not succeeded in making schools places where all young people want to and are able to learn. It is time to invite students to join the conversations about how we might accomplish that" (Cook-Sather, 2002, p.9).

Yet the research made it clear that we must constantly ask ourselves whether what we are doing in schools is meaningful, mutually beneficial and sustainable: "Are we creating a new order of experience for students in schools, new roles for teachers and students - or will the idea of consulting students prove to be little more than a passing fashion, a tokenistic nod in the direction of consumerism?" (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006, p.229).

It is hoped that with the insights and recommendations gleaned from continual research and practice into this field, student involvement and dialogic encounters can become the means through which we can truly challenge the damaging forces in current education agendas, embrace the uncertainty of learning and imaginatively collaborate to find better ways of moving forward together.

We would be very interested to hear from educators and researchers about student agency initiatives that they have experienced, in schools or beyond them. Have these initiatives been successful? How and why are they working? Can we collaborate in order to develop a more meaningful SLC model across schools in the UK and beyond? Please email lfl@educ.cam.ac.uk.

About the author

Stephanie Hill is an Associate Assistant Principal/Senior Pedagogy Leader at Passmores Academy, Harlow, UK. Between 2013-15, Stephanie studied part-time for an MEd at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. Steph has always been concerned with developing constructive relationships between students and teachers.

Bibliography

Andrews, D. & Lewis, M., 2007. Transforming practice from within: the power of the professional learning community. In L. Stoll & K. Seashore Louis, eds. *Professional Learning Communities: Divergence, Depth and Dilemmas*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Stoll, L., Thomas, S., Wallace, M., Greenwood, A., Hawkey, K., Ingram, M., Atkinson, A., Smith, M. , 2005. *Creating and Sustaining Effective Professional Learning Communities*, Universities of Bristol, Bath and London, Institute of Education.

Collinson, V., 2012. Leading by learning, learning by leading. *Professional Development in Education*, 38(2), pp.247–266.

Cook-Sather, A., 2002. Authorizing Students' Perspectives: Toward Trust, Dialogue, and Change in Education. *Educational Researcher*, 31(4), pp.3–14.

Giles, C. & Hargreaves, A., 2006. The Sustainability of Innovative Schools as Learning Organizations and Professional Learning Communities During Standardized Reform. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42, pp.124–156.

Harris, A. & Muijs, D., 2005. *Improving Schools Through Teacher Leadership*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Hargreaves, D.H., 2010. *Creating a self-improving school system*, Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.

Hargreaves, A., 1995. Renewal in the Age of Paradox. *Self-Renewing Schools*, 52(7), pp.14–19.

Fielding, M., 2001a. Beyond the Rhetoric of Student Voice: new departures or new constraints in the transformation of 21st century schooling? *Forum*, 43(2), pp.100–110.

Fielding, M., 2001b. Students as Radical Agents of Change. *Journal of Educational Change*, 2, pp.123–141.

Fielding, M., 2009. Public Space and Educational Leadership: Reclaiming and Renewing Our

Radical Traditions. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 37, pp.497–521.

Fullan, M., 2013. The New Pedagogy: Students and Teachers as Learning Partners. *LEARNing Landscapes*, 6(2), pp.23–29.

Rudduck, J. & Fielding, M., 2006. Student voice and the perils of popularity. *Educational Review*, 58(2), pp.219–231.

Simkins, T., 2005. Leadership in Education, "What Works" or "What Makes Sense"? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 33, pp.9–26.

Simons, H., 1996. The Paradox of Case Study. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 26(2), pp.225–240. Skerrett, A., 2010. "There's going to be community. There's going to be knowledge": Designs for learning in a standardised age. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26, pp.648–655.

Stoll, L. & Fink, D., 1996. *Changing Our Schools: Linking School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Stoll, L. & Seashore Louis, K., 2007. Professional learning communities: elaborating new approaches. In L. Stoll & K. Seashore Louis, eds. *Professional Learning Communities: Divergence, Depth and Dilemmas*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Wenger, E.C. & Snyder, W.M., 2000. Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier. *Harvard Business Review*, (January-February), pp.139–145.

∽

Previous issues of InForm can be downloaded on the LfL website. Leadership for Learning sends out regular bulletins with news on current research and opportunities to engage. If you would like to receive them, please fill in the Join us form on the LfL website. You can also follow LfL on Twitter: @LfLCambridge.

For any other queries:

University of Cambridge
Faculty of Education
184 Hills Road
Cambridge
CB2 8PQ
Tel: +44 (0) 1223 767621
www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/lfl
Email address: lfl@educ.cam.ac.uk