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Stepping up in modern foreign languages: professional development across the primary to secondary school transition

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Abstract

The government funded two-year project, *Stepping Up in Modern Foreign Languages* (MFL), sought to align MFL teaching across the transition between primary and secondary schools. This paper describes the results of the project evaluation that was conducted using Cultural-historical Activity Theory as its research approach. This approach viewed the project as a system and enabled the identification of a number of contradictions within that system. The most significant finding is the impact of the project's participatory or 'bottom-up' approach. This involved MFL specialists from mostly secondary schools taking time to conduct needs analysis exercises with colleagues in primary schools and listening carefully to their concerns. This led to the development of bespoke training courses with programmes and materials being shared across the project via an online platform. A further analysis of the findings framed by the five significant dimensions of transition [Galton, M., J. Gray and J. Ruddock. 1999. *The Impact of School Transitions and Transfers on Pupil Progress and Attainment*. Cambridge: Homerton College. DCSF Research Report no. 131.] shows how the project's emphasis on building social capital, rather than specific teaching resources, facilitated progress in four out of the five dimensions. The paper concludes with a consideration of some implications for practice and policy level.

Introduction

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages (2019) has recently made a compelling case for a 'National Recovery Programme for Languages' in the UK, with its first strategic objective being to develop and implement an inclusive languages policy from age 5 to 18. Whilst this is a wholly laudable objective, a coherent strategy across these age ranges faces a number of practical challenges, which the programme itself implicitly acknowledges, for example, referring to the need for suitably trained teachers with access to high-quality CPD, and the need for effective communication across the primary to secondary transition. These transition challenges were the focus of *Stepping Up in Modern Foreign Languages*, a project funded by the UK's Department for Education co-ordinated by the University of Gloucestershire between July 2014 and March 2016. The project focused on teachers of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) working on either side of the transition between primary and secondary school, that is Key Stage 2 (covering pupils aged 7–11, i.e. the last four years of primary schooling) and Key Stage 3 (pupils aged 12–14, i.e. the first three years of secondary schooling).

This paper reports on an internal evaluation conducted by the university staff that had oversight of the project. It provides a brief policy context to the project before outlining the research approach taken.

The analysis of the research findings highlights a number of implications for teachers, school leaders and policymakers who wish to support MFL instruction.

The project

Between 2013 and 2016 the Department for Education (DfE) provided funding for nine projects across England to provide continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers in primary and secondary state schools to improve the quality of teaching in Modern Foreign Languages (MFL). The University of Gloucestershire together with an initial consortium comprising eight schools and the Gloucester-based Global Languages Immersion Centre (GLIC) received a grant to run *Stepping Up in Modern Foreign Languages*. This project sought to provide professional development opportunities for MFL teachers working on both sides of the Key Stage 2 (KS2) and Key Stage 3 (KS3) divide in order to facilitate a smoother primary to secondary school transition in MFL.

Rather than develop CPD programmes and resources centrally, Stepping Up followed a 'bottom-up' approach built on the understanding that project impact would best be sustained if participants took ownership of the programme from the outset thus avoiding tokenistic forms of participation (Rahnema 1992). The project encouraged specialist MFL teachers (mostly but not all from secondary schools) to develop bespoke programmes based on a shared analysis of the needs of their less experienced counterparts in neighbouring primary schools. In this way the project borrowed from approaches designed to empower rural communities in developing countries (Chambers 1994). This, in turn, is underpinned by a socio-cultural theory of learning (Vygotsky 1978) in which communication among participants is central to the learning process. The focus on participation led *inter alia* to the development of communities of practice (Wenger 1998) that could provide mutual support rather than expecting professional development to be driven by the central project team.

Termed the 'Gloucestershire Model' by the DfE project team, the process involved lead schools in:

(i) Inviting partner schools to participate
(ii) Conducting a joint MFL needs analysis with partners
(iii) Providing face-to-face CPD sessions with partners in light of the needs analysis
(iv) Offering one-to-one support between CPD sessions
(v) Sharing all teaching resources online using a freely available platform (Yammer).

Occasional project-wide meetings and monitoring visits to schools facilitated further sharing of lessons learned among project participants. In the project's second year GLIC was forced to close due to local authority funding cuts; an MFL consultancy took over this advisory role and extended the project into Bristol and Somerset. By the end of the second year, the project had reached 31 secondary schools and 237 primaries.

French was chosen as the main target language. Over three-quarters of primary schools in England teach French at KS2 (Tinsley and Board 2015) with the figure in Gloucestershire being even higher with 83% of those schools responding to a local survey teaching French at KS2 (Burch 2014). That said, research participants were free to adapt activities and ideas to suit other languages; indeed some lead schools did so in order to teach Spanish.

This research presents a case study based on the findings of the project evaluation. While monitoring tangible aspects, such as the number of schools involved and the languages covered, provides the *what* of the Stepping Up project, this evaluation explores the *why* and *how* of project impact.

Such projects comprise multiple interactions among individuals and institutions and to embrace this complexity we pose the broad question: *How has the project worked as a*

system to achieve its aims? This requires us to understand the policy context in which the project is situated, the perspectives of those implementing the project and the way in which these dimensions interact. Building on our findings we also address a secondary question: *What are the implications of this for further work on primary to secondary transition in MFL*?

Exploring the policy context

In 2002 EU Heads of State agreed on the importance of improving the mastery of basic skills, in particular by 'teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age' (Barcelona European Council 2002: 19). In most EU countries, learning at least one foreign language has been compulsory from the age of 8 to 18 since 2003 (European Commission 2017). In England learning a language in Key Stage 2 became compulsory in September 2014; currently, MFL is compulsory in KS2 and KS3 (pupils aged 7 to 14).

At EU level, 67.3% of all primary students were learning one or more foreign languages in 2005 and by 2014, this figure had increased to 83.8% (European Commission 2017). By 2015/16, in the great majority of EU countries, students had been learning at least one language as a compulsory subject for 10 to 12 years. In nearly all European countries, English is the foreign language most taught at primary and secondary education (European Commission 2017), owing to its dominant status as a 'global language' (Graham et al. 2016). England has no one obvious choice of foreign language although French, German and Spanish remain the top preferences year on year (Joint Council of Qualifications 2018). This lack of a clear direction, coupled with the dominance of English, militates against students opting to learn a foreign language. That said, in a survey of English primary schools (Tinsley and Board 2016) almost 60% of schools claimed to have more than five years' experience in teaching languages at Key Stage 2. This can be attributed not only to the compulsory nature of languages at KS2 currently, but also the influence of the National Languages Strategy 2002–2010.

At primary level, language teaching across the EU is undertaken by a mixture of generalist and specialist teachers and represents between 5% and 10% of total instruction time in the majority of European countries (European Commission 2017). England is unlike most of the rest of Europe in that schools are free to decide how much curriculum time to allocate to learning a language. This leads to a wide variety of provision at primary level which in turn poses challenges for secondary schools. There is a variability in the amount and quality of language teaching provision at primary school in the UK, more so than in other subjects (Graham et al. 2016: 683). As a result, some secondary schools advocate a 'clean slate' approach, starting language instruction from scratch with all learners at the beginning of Year 7, regardless of the 'mixed experience' classroom with its varying levels of prior knowledge (Pachler et al. 2014: 97).

A list of factors impeding successful transition in languages from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 published by Hunt et al. (2008) includes inadequate training of teachers, insufficient liaison between primary and secondary schools and a lack of continuity in language learning between primary and secondary school. Interestingly, the same list formed part of the Burstall Report, published in 1974. The status of primary language instruction has come a long way – from non-statutory, through entitlement, to statutory in KS2 – yet the position regarding the transition to secondary school appears to have changed little in over forty years.

The 2015/16 Language Trends Survey (Tinsley and Board 2016) found that the prevalent attitude within secondary schools is that primary language teaching does not enhance language learning in secondary school. This was also a conclusion of the Burstall Report, suggesting that attitudes around transition are stubbornly unchanging. With 99% of primary schools reportedly teaching languages at KS2 and 42% at KS1

(Tinsley and Board 2016), the challenge is not to begin teaching languages at primary level but rather to develop the quality of that teaching in order to facilitate a smoother transition to KS3.

Chambers (2014) documents widespread poor liaison between primary and secondary schools leading to ill-informed arrangements for transition with only 1 of the 12 secondary schools in his study having an appropriate transition policy and strategy in place. Subsequently, in half of the schools surveyed by the official inspectorate (Ofsted) in November and December of 2015, primary schools were still not found to be working sufficiently well with secondary schools to ensure effective transition in foreign language learning from primary to secondary (Ofsted 2016). Although recent research suggests that the small but significant linguistic progress at primary school level may be built on across the transition divide (Courtney 2017), poor transitional arrange-ments may have a long-term knock-on effect at secondary school level, even up to GCSE level. As the Chief Inspector of Schools stated in light of the disappointing take-up of languages at GCSE, 'It seems clear that if the government's ambition is to be met, primary schools will need to lay the foundations in these subjects before their pupils move on to study them at secondary school' (HMCI 2016).

There are sources of hope. The 2015/2016 Language Trends Survey (Tinsley and Board 2016) high-lights 'interesting examples of effective collaboration' between primary feeders and their secondary counterparts. Examples include:

- Teaching and professional support such as secondary school staff teaching languages in their feeder primaries and primary school children visiting secondary school language laboratories
- Visits and exchanges organised by secondary schools including foreign exchange students visiting primary schools
- Continuing Professional Development provided by secondary schools to KS2 teachers
- Joint planning conducted between primary feeder schools and their secondary language col- leagues with pupil attainment information being shared.

The survey concludes, 'There are indications that more secondary schools are starting to make small modifications to their practice in order to accommodate pupils who have learned a language in primary school. However, it is clear that secondary schools do not see primary languages as a plat- form from which to significantly improve standards' (Tinsley and Board 2016: 8).

Difficulties in managing transition are exacerbated by a lack of communication among staff on both sides of the divide. Teaching is often perceived as a professionally isolated role (Ostovar-Nameghi and Sheikhahmadi 2016) with little opportunity for professional collaboration (Cookson 2005). In the case of primary language instruction, this sense of isolation has wider implications. Teacher confidence is an essential aspect of language teaching and it has been shown that primary teachers are less likely to focus on subjects in which they lack confidence (Maynard 2011). Subject knowledge is a crucial aspect of MFL teaching (Barnes 2006) and closely associated with pro- fessional development. Professional collaboration is therefore critical in building the MFL capacity in primary schools.

In a seminal report on the impacts of school transitions and transfers on pupil achievement, Galton, Gray and Ruddock (1999) identify five significant dimensions of transition. Using the metaphor of 'bridging the gap' Barber (1999) links these dimensions with five learning bridges to transition (Howe 2011). Each bridge describes a category of strategies designed to bridge the transition gap in order to enhance progression in children's learning from one school to the next:

- *The bureaucratic bridge* – e.g. sharing information about pupils; good working relationships between primary and secondary schools; feedback to primary schools of Year 7 progress
- *The social and personal bridge* – e.g. induction days; open evenings; pupil peer mentoring; pupil and parents' guides
- *The curriculum content bridge* – e.g. effective use of pupil data; cross-phase projects; exchange of curriculum maps; joint planning
- *The pedagogical bridge* – e.g. shared understanding of effective teaching and learning; team teaching; teacher exchanges between primary and secondary schools
- *The management-of-learning bridge* – e.g. pupils as active participants in transition and their own learning; pupil portfolios

Commentaries on transition (Barber 1999; Galton et al. 1999; Howe 2011) suggest that many schools are able to point to aspects of their practice in relation to the first two bridges, whereas the pedagogical and management-of-learning bridges are seen as more challenging.[1] Courtney (2017) acknowledges that an abrupt shift in pedagogy between KS2 and KS3 can negatively influence learner attitude and motivation. The bridges themselves provide a framework for interpreting our data as discussed below.

Evaluation methodology

In alignment with the project's participatory ethos we have sought to understand the project from the perspectives of those involved in implementing it as we address our research questions: *How has the project worked as a system to achieve its aims?* and *what are the implications of this for primary to secondary transition?*

Given that we cannot observe people's thinking, we have adopted an interpretive approach setting out to understand the context and perspectives of our research subjects (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011). In this way, we avoid the positivist habit of imposing an external structure on subjects that might predetermine the parameters of their responses. This means that our findings are context-dependent rather than generalisable although they do provide a valuable perspective on learning processes among teachers from different settings working together, often for the first time.

The evaluation requires us to understand learning at individual and institutional levels including reference to the wider educational system. With this multi-layered interaction in mind, our research is framed by Cultural-historical Activity Theory (hereinafter referred to as Activity Theory) as described by Engeström (1987). Activity Theory explores actions and relationships at three levels:

- Individual (e.g. the teacher and their professional development)
- Collaborative (e.g. within a school's language department)
- Systemic or collective (e.g. the whole school and wider school clusters).

This multi-layered approach offers 'a non-reductionist view of human activity' (McNicholl and Blake 2013: 295) paying attention to cultural and historical dimensions of the activity system elements: i.e. tools; rules and culture; division of labour and community. This 'second generation' activity system (Figure 1) is a development of Vygotsky's first generation (Engeström 1987) which is a simple triangle linking an individual subject to the environment that they act upon using a tool or mediating artefact (normally speech) positioned at the apex of the triangle.

For the purposes of this research, the participating MFL teachers within each lead school are taken as the *subject* of the activity system. The subject acts upon the *object*, that is MFL provision in primary schools, with the principle *outcome* being the transitional
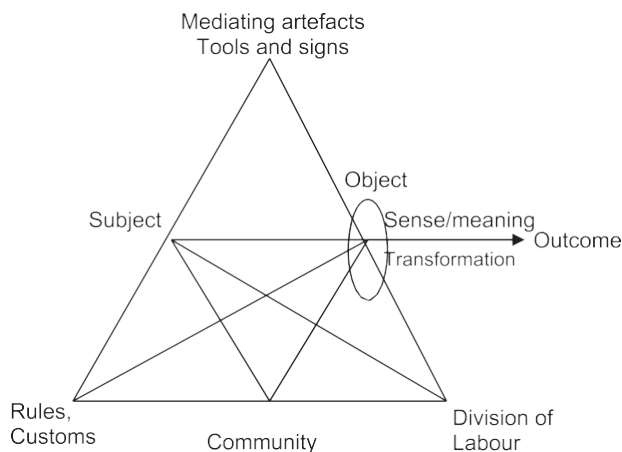
Figure 1. A second generation activity system (Adapted from Engeström in Jonassen and Land 2000: 99).

relationship or bridge-building between the lead school and partner schools. The *tools* or *mediating artefacts* shown in the activity system diagram (Figure 1) comprise a range of techniques and resources by the lead school teachers (subject) to work with their feeder schools (object). Any activity system has *rules*, both written and unwritten depending on the prevailing culture, as well as having tasks distributed across the system (*division of labour*). The final element is that of the wider *community* that is involved or inter- acts with the activity.

Activity Theory research is generally interventionist with researchers introducing ideas and challenges through workshops termed 'change laboratories' (Edwards et al. 2009). The limited time avail- able to our project participants did not permit such a regular programme of meetings; we therefore simply used the elements of the activity system to provide the framework for our analysis of the project.

In every activity system, contradictions may occur when tensions arise within and between elements of the system. These contradictions are a driving force for change and can occur at four levels:

- *Primary*: within one element of the activity system, e.g. within the 'tools' element there may be differences in preferred resources or methods
- *Secondary*: between different elements of the system, e.g. between 'tools' and 'rules' where training sessions do not dovetail with a school's financial processes
- *Tertiary*: between the object of the activity and the object of a 'culturally more advanced form' of activity, e.g. where the 'object' of transition in French teaching is replaced by say, transitions for learning Mandarin
- *Quaternary*: between the central activity and its neighbour activities, e.g. where a school's efforts in language teaching run counter to externally driven imperatives around numeracy scores.

In generating solutions to such contradictions participants may re-interpret and expand the definition of the object of the activity system. This capacity to develop new forms of activity is referred to as *expansive learning* (Toiviainen and Engeström 2009).

As interpreters of social phenomena, we have to negotiate with subjects in order to clarify meaning with them. For this reason, we gathered data through focus group discussions and one- to-one semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face or via telephone. A question schedule guided each interview through the elements of the

activity system while prompting interviewees to be aware of any possible contradictions. After piloting the schedule, we conducted seven interviews comprising three focus group discussions and four one-to-one interviews. In all, our sample comprised 22 teachers from lead schools in Gloucestershire and Somerset.

Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder to facilitate verbatim transcription; notes were also taken as a back-up measure. This discursive approach provided a contrast to the questionnaires and feedback sheets that were used to gather data remotely for project monitoring purposes. That said, the experience of conducting monitoring and evaluation visits to a number of participating schools aided a deeper understanding of our research context as well providing opportunities to verify findings.

Interview transcripts were analysed using the qualitative data analysis software package, NVivo, which facilitated the coding of data and clustering of sub-themes. Initially, we identified emerging themes across the data. These included teacher isolation, the flexibility of approach and a range of project management issues. Eventually, all these were gathered under the heading of activity system elements such as 'subject' 'rules' and 'mediating artefacts' (Figure 1) while some themes were identified as contradictions.

Our chief ethical concern throughout was to maintain strict confidentiality so that participants felt free to voice concerns about their own professional contexts as well as their experiences of the project. Care was also taken to arrange interviews with the minimum of disruption to these busy professionals.

Findings

These findings are presented under two broad categories (a) those clustered under the activity system elements and (b) those that feature as contradictions within the activity system.

Findings related to elements of the activity system

Context

This category covers the *subject* (MFL teaching in lead schools) and *object* (primary MFL provision) of the project activity. Two interlocking themes emerge from the data: the historical context and cultural shift within the project as it developed communities of practice (Wenger 1998). Historically, teachers reflected on the status of primary languages with one respondent describing them as a 'sinking ship' being re-floated by the project through its provision of training. Teachers explained that such support had not been widely available since the withdrawal of funding in 2010. Teachers in lead schools are also aware of the pivotal role they have played in the project's success; for example, taking responsibility for overcoming the psychological barriers that primary teachers face:

> French is something that frightens people, and they feel they have to be perfect, and they need quite a lot of support. (Interview G)

This support for colleagues in feeder schools was provided during a period of new curriculum demands, something that appears to have helped establish a stronger bond than might otherwise have been the case, with one teacher suggesting that the project had 'created a community of language teachers' (Focus Group D). This has resonance with the issue of teacher isolation discussed above with one primary language teacher mentioning this explicitly:

> Before this I was on my own … we work in a classroom … which is quite lonely. (Focus Group D)

This development of new professional relationships emerges as a critical success factor for the project.

Mediating artefacts

This element includes needs analysis tools and other printable resources, the online learning platform (Yammer) where these resources were shared, twilight CPD sessions and the project support pro- vided through GLIC and the MFL consultancy.

The Yammer platform appears to have operated beyond the initial intention of providing a means for lead schools to communicate and share resources. Several teachers report on its role as a network- ing tool for local clusters of primary schools with scaled down versions of the project platform emer- ging around the region.

Not all schools used Yammer in this way and there were pockets of minimal use. One respondent explained that sharing resources in this way was not always helpful:

> … although people shared things on Yammer, and I could see what they were doing, I was doing something very different at another school. (Interview E)

This was the only statement of its kind but it does highlight the potential contradiction of sharing generic materials among schools while expecting project leads to develop bespoke training to meet the needs of their partner schools.

The data include approaches developed by lead schools themselves such as the use of PGCE students, pupil language ambassadors and language-specific transition days. A significant development noted in the data is increased collaboration on assessment as this primary teacher explains:

> I'm working with [secondary teacher] on assessment. We're now moving towards a system of targets … and what they would expect a year 3, 4, 5 and 6 to do, which mirrors what we do in English, Maths and other subjects. (Focus Group D)

In this way, MFL appears to be aligning with other subjects. Meanwhile, an example of a specific MFL tool is an exercise book that a primary teacher reports giving to her pupils:

> … from an idea of [secondary teacher]. You give it to them in Year Three and they follow it through until they get to Year Six and it highlights … the progress they're making … (Focus Group D)

This demonstrates the way in which new tools and techniques have been applied within schools as a direct result of discussions among teachers across the primary-secondary divide.

Rules and culture

Themes under this heading include cultural shifts in terms of 'listening' and 'flexibility' but also high-light points where rules and structures influence project delivery.

The requirement for lead schools to conduct a needs analysis appears to have encouraged a cultural shift. Rather than secondary schools entering the relationship from a presumed position of authority, they were cast in the role of researchers with much to learn from the primary world that they were entering. This appears in data from two focus groups, firstly as a way of identifying issues:

> … you actually meet the primary teachers and they start saying what they need, you think, 'I can help you with that, that's no problem.' They are coming in and realising that you are not trying to dictate things to them … (Focus Group A)

This observation is reinforced by another group where they discuss mutual learning:

> I like the requirement that the leads schools go and find out, do that fact finding from the partner schools at that early stage, so that from the very beginning it's a collaborative thing with mutual learning going on; that's been really good. (Focus Group C)

Building on this process, primary teachers came together at lead school meetings, an important step towards gaining confidence:

> … it was … a chance to get together themselves, because they were all sitting in their own schools, quaking in their boots a lot of them, and they came in and realised everyone was in the same boat … (Focus Group A)

Again this resonates with the issue of teacher isolation and the development of professional confidence gained through working collaboratively (Cookson 2005; Ostovar-Nameghi and Sheikhahmadi 2016).

The data suggest a mismatch between the co-created rules of the project and those of the grant-giving body, the Department for Education. Government funding cycles operate on a financial year running from April to April while the academic year begins in September so frustration is expressed in relation to the project ending in March to suit Government funding cycles. This is particularly evident among secondary school teachers who generally have more time available during June and July when they could have engaged more fully in the project. In spite of these frustrations, the high degree of teacher autonomy in the project is felt by some participants to have enabled lead school staff to play to their strengths:

> … having flexibility … was positive, and helped us work more easily together as a department. (Interview E)

Another positive feature in the data is the English Baccalaureate, an initiative that encourages school leavers to take a language qualification, which appears to have encouraged senior managers to take a greater interest in the standard of language instruction at primary level.

Staff availability is seen as an issue with one secondary teacher explaining that, 'it's not a job where you have allocated free time' (Focus Group B). Particular constraints arise for some part-time primary MFL teachers who only teach during the regular class teacher's PPA (planning, preparation and assessment) time, something that often prevented them from attending training on days other than on their timetabled day in school.

For schools in Gloucestershire the presence of selective grammar schools alongside the comprehensive system is problematic, hence 'school allocation' arises as a theme. With numerous feeder primary schools being affiliated to the grammar schools it is unsurprising to find comprehensive school teachers claiming that a nearby grammar has 'poached' their primary schools (and their associated funding). Equally a lead grammar school teacher appears to be unsure about which primary schools to approach, choosing to work with local primaries rather than known feeder schools that are further afield. Such issues do not appear in local authority areas where grammar schools are not present although one lead school teacher explained that care is always required to avoid 'treading on anyone's toes.'

As well as external rules affecting the project, there is one case where the project influences the internal processes of a participating school, as the lead teacher explains:

… everybody had a performance management criterion that they would be working alongside and developing relationships with their primary schools. (Interview E)

This shows a school building project objectives into its management processes; however, this was not sustained over the long term:

> … obviously they [the criteria] run yearly, so once they achieved that, you need to think of something new this year and unfortunately other things have taken priority so that hasn't been continued into this year. (Interview B)

In this case the project influence is short-lived as other priorities out-compete MFL.

Community
In Activity Theory, the term 'community' denotes the wider population involved in an activity system. Evidence from this study suggests that the community of language learning and instruction has expanded over the life of the project. Within the participating schools, additional members of MFL departments came to be involved in the project, for example, producing and delivering training to partner schools. Several respondents talked of this widening of the community being continued beyond the end of the project. The idea that their whole MFL department would become involved in transition is considered by some respondents to be the next step:

> I think they [teaching team] will be an awful lot more involved as students from all the primaries start to actually come through with more expertise as a result of the resources that we shared … as those things work their way through there'll be much more kind of cohesion between us and the primaries. (Interview F)

Data show this growing awareness extending to pupils and through them to their parents:

> It's given languages a higher profile in the school. The children are confident and they talk to their parents about it … (Focus Group D)

Promoting parental awareness is beyond the scope of this research as is measuring the impact of this; it could, however, prove productive in terms of eliciting local support for language learning over the long term.

Division of labour
The data confirm that recruiting primary schools to take part in the project was a challenging aspect of the project for many lead schools. Although free training was offered, the project started at a time when primary schools were grappling with the introduction of a revised National Curriculum and languages were not seen as a priority by many. The project encouraged lead schools to recruit their own primary school partners, building on existing relationships where possible. In retrospect, the central recruitment of primary schools and allocation to lead schools by the project would have eased these difficulties, which, in one case led to a lead school leaving the project.

Beyond the language teachers, members of the senior management are reported as being 'very supportive', while other Key Stage 3 teachers also feature as participants in transition activities such as language days. The project appears to have led teachers to forge new relationships with school administrative teams and finance departments who had a key role to play in making appropriate funding claims. This wider involvement was not foreseen at the project inception but proved critical in ensuring the smooth running of activities.

Outcomes

Other projects funded under this DfE programme focused predominantly on the creation of a set of resources; the principal outcome for Stepping Up, beyond the immediate CPD provision, was to stimulate and facilitate communication among its secondary and primary school participants. In terms of the Activity Theory model (Figure 1), links between the subject (lead schools) and object (primary school provision) were enhanced as the networking process helped to create a sense of community among local clusters of schools.

The demand that lead schools conduct a needs analysis of primary schools and provide training appropriate to addressing those needs was overwhelmingly well-received as it avoided any notion of secondary schools 'dictating' to primary schools. Sharing was not just from secondary to primary but *vice versa*, as well as between primary schools, as one lead school participant observed:

> … from the last few meetings, it's been much more a case of them sharing ideas between them as well, and looking at things that work, because I've got the expertise … but they've got much more idea of the kinds of resources they'd want to be using in a primary context. (Interview F)

As this respondent suggests, lead schools clearly have expertise to share despite the bottom-up approach; this brings to mind the community development adage, 'experts on tap – not on top'. Project impact was clearly enhanced by the way in which primary schools felt supported by the lead secondary schools without being dominated by them. The view of this primary school teacher was widely echoed:

> It's been great to have that support there, because without it, I don't think I would have done such a good job, or felt confident about doing it … (Focus Group D)

The impact of these professional relationships on future pupil attainment could not be measured directly within the project timeframe although secondary school respondents felt that a positive outcome was likely as the following response suggests:

> … we've got much more of a sense of the levels that they're [the pupils] coming in at, at the end of Year 6, and I think as those things work their way through there'll be much more kind of cohesion between us and the primaries as well, because we can start assuming a greater depth of knowledge or understanding or a stronger skills base that's common to all the children coming through. (Interview F)

Assessing the longevity of these outcomes in any formal sense is also beyond the scope of this research but participants voiced their intention to build on these professional relationships inspired by the advantages that they experienced while working together on the project. In preparation for this paper, we conducted a brief survey of 25 former lead schools. Only eight responses were received and of these, five schools (62%) reported some residual project activity, ranging from maintaining communication with feeder primary schools to continuing to offer CPD, in one case charging for this.

Findings in relation to contradictions

Activity Theory is helpful in identifying contradictions within an activity. This is important because contradictions present opportunities for the system to learn; they can also represent challenges that might militate against sustained project impact in the long term.

A primary contradiction, i.e. within one component of the activity system, is apparent in the *rules and culture* element in relation to the recruitment of project schools. Lead schools were encouraged to recruit their own network but partner schools were prohibited from linking with more than one lead school. This facilitated the fair allocation of project funds but led to inconsistencies where primary schools had strong ties with more than one secondary school that was involved in the project. As mentioned above, the presence of grammar schools with extensive catchment areas further confused the recruitment process. With hindsight, a carefully negotiated process of school allocation on the part of the project coordinator would have eased this problem.

Two secondary contradictions, i.e. between elements of the activity system, can be identified. The first is between the project *culture* and *mediating artefacts*. While the project insisted on lead schools responding to participants' needs often with bespoke materials, it also encouraged the sharing of resources on the Yammer platform. The data show two ways in which this complicated matters; firstly, in not allowing lead schools to use their pre-prepared resources:

> I got a couple of ideas that I could offer in sessions, but … they were like, 'no, we want this,' and I thought 'OK we will go with what you want now and we will see where it takes us'. (Focus Group A)

This illustrates the respondent's taken-for-granted assumption that secondary staff should simply teach their primary peers rather than sharing in a process of mutual learning. This attitude changed through careful communication of the project's participatory ethos.

Secondly, relying on bespoke programmes had the potential to inhibit learning across the project as this teacher observed:

> (If) everybody within the project was doing similar things, it may have been more cohesive as a project … on Yammer I could see what they were doing (but) *I* was doing something very different. (Interview E)

This comment highlights a potential danger of operating in a bottom-up manner, i.e. allowing teachers to pursue their own initiatives can reduce opportunities for collaboration and ultimately increase individual workload. That said, analysis of the Yammer site suggests that many resources were shared and discussed among teachers across the project.

Another secondary contradiction between *tools* and *rules* arose because CPD events varied in nature and timing. This was not easily accommodated by the cumbersome administrative processes of the co-ordinating body and was exacerbated by the Government's funding cycles that did not overlap with the academic year. This contradiction led to a re-design of project reimbursement processes so they became more responsive to lead schools' varied inputs.

A recurring tertiary level contradiction (i.e. between competing *objects* of the activity system) appeared where schools' shifting priorities contradicted their own ambitions in promoting MFL. A striking case occurred in the lead school that had set a performance management criterion for working with their primary schools. The teacher reported that:

> … unfortunately other things have taken priority so that hasn't continued into this year. (Interview E)

The issue here is that the priorities of the lead (secondary) school teachers (the subject of the activity) are being diverted away from the project's focus on primary schools in order to address other priorities.

A quaternary contradiction, i.e. between the activity system and the wider system, is suggested by references to money and the need for schools to remain financially secure:

> … many of the secondary schools will be running at considerable deficit, so I think that they won't be putting the money into future developments. (Focus Group C)

This has implications for the sustainability of project impact. In response, the project coordinator acknowledged the stresses felt by colleagues while emphasising to school senior managers the benefits that this activity represented in terms of enhanced teaching and learning across the primary-secondary transition.

Discussion

In exploring the question of *how the project has worked to achieve its aims and the implications of this for primary to secondary transition,* a number of examples of effective practice are evident from this evaluation. Having explored our findings in relation to the activity system model (Figure 1), this discussion is framed initially by the concept of transition 'bridges' (Barber 1999) introduced earlier.

- *Bureaucracy* Although Galton et al. (1999) suggests that communication across the bureaucratic bridge tends to centre on senior managers, the Stepping Up evaluation reveals examples of effective relationship building between teachers and non-teaching support staff across the primary-secondary divide. The need for teaching staff to take ownership of the project proved difficult for some but this appears to have deepened management discussions down to class teacher level including the sharing of assessment frameworks with the aim of aligning pupil data.
- *Social/personal* Although pupil interactions are not the focus of this project, the evaluations identify a variety of examples, including Year 11 language ambassadors visiting primary schools and primary pupils attending transition days at secondary schools, where MFL is included among other disciplines.
- *Curriculum* This was central to the project; most secondary schools shared examples of curriculum maps and content that primary school pupils might usefully cover before transition. Crucially this was not in the sense of dictating what had to be done, rather it was offered as an explanation of current practice in secondary schools. The understanding that curriculum content was being shared rather than imposed was encouraged through the close working relationships engendered through the project.
- *Pedagogy* This bridge is often overlooked because it is seen as more challenging than others (Barber 1999; Galton et al. 1999; Howe 2011). Stepping Up engaged with this aspect through regular CPD sessions in which lead schools shared their subject knowledge while primary colleagues interpreted this through their own age-appropriate teaching strategies. This activity was reinforced among clusters of schools that shared teaching resources through their local Yammer sites and informal, face-to-face gatherings.
- *Management of learning* We encountered one example of self-managed learning in the form of pupils keeping a language diary from Year Three to Year Six but this did not bridge the transition to secondary. Indeed, no evidence emerged of pupils managing their own learning across the primary-secondary transition. This is perhaps unsurprising given that only 1 in 50 schools appear to do this (Barber 1999, citing Galton 1999). This is something that could have been addressed specifically had there been a further project phase.

Implications for primary to secondary transition at the school level

Much of the project's success in addressing these different dimensions of transition appears to be linked to the quality of communication among teachers as highlighted in our

findings. Where teachers from different school phases work as equals on the co-evolution of programmes, this appears to build social capital that supports professional development and, as found elsewhere (Mason and Poyatos Matas 2016), has potential benefits in terms of staff retention.

Data such as the primary teacher stating that, 'Before this I was on my own' highlights the project's success in overcoming professional isolation. Other responses illustrate the benefits of these professional relationships in terms of overcoming fear, 'sitting in their own schools, quaking in their boots', building self-confidence and gaining insights into the other side of the primary-secondary divide. The local networks that the project facilitated, initially face-to-face, then moving online in some cases, generated and reinforced social capital among MFL teachers.

The evaluation has shown that primary teachers learn readily from secondary colleagues, provided that the relationship is one of respect and collaboration in which those with expertise in MFL listen and respond to their primary colleagues' needs. Just as the teacher is often seen as the most significant resource in MFL instruction (Jones and Coffey 2017), so it is with the professional development of MFL teachers. Respectful human interaction appears to be key in improving practice across the primary-secondary divide. Both MFL teaching and professional development resonate with Vygotsky's concept of the 'more knowledgeable other' extending the learner's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978). Crucially, the Stepping Up relationship shows that each side learn from the other; this is truly dialogic learning (Alexander 2004).

We should add the caveat that this reliance on staff development may be context specific. Allen et al. (2012) suggest that staff turnover will be higher in densely populated areas that generate more alternative job offers; such job markets correlate with areas of high deprivation. The Stepping Up project's context is characterised by relatively sparse, more affluent areas where teacher retention rates tend to be higher than the national average. Even so, a strong network of MFL support appears to have immediate benefits for pupils regardless of the potential longer-term management benefits.

Implications for policy

Resources such as time and money are perhaps inevitably seen as insufficient by professionals who aspire to do more for their students and their discipline. This is necessarily a question of priorities, which are in turn influenced by the wider policy context. One significant policy development in recent years has been the ranking of secondary schools based on the Progress 8 and Attainment 8 framework (DfE 2014). These are designed to ensure student achievement across a broad-based curriculum but crucially they do not necessarily require a foreign language qualification. Thus MFL, like the performing arts, is vulnerable to becoming starved of resources in an environment where schools may feel forced to enhance their ranking in performance tables.

Perhaps more insidiously, performance tables themselves have the potential to undermine efforts to bring together MFL teachers from 'competing' schools. Although this is a well-documented outcome of a performativity culture (Ball and Olmedo 2013), this evaluation has shown that MFL professionals respond extremely positively to cross-institutional approaches such as the Stepping Up project. This suggests that schools wishing to maintain and develop a broad curriculum would do well to resist the isolating tendencies of performance ranking in favour of cross-institutional and cross-phase collaborations among subject specialists.

As for MFL policy *per se*, the basis for this project highlights the need for consistent support for compulsory language up to GCSE level; this would increase the supply of primary school teachers entering the profession with greater foreign language expertise. In time, this would feed through to primary schools so that one form of the familiar staffing model that relies on a single language specialist can be avoided. This, in turn, would relieve the problem of isolation felt by many primary MFL teachers.

Reflections on the use of Activity Theory

Cultural-historical Activity Theory normally demands a developmental process shared among all project stakeholders as they explore the activity system in detail (Edwards et al. 2009; Toiviainen and Engeström 2009). Resources did not allow for such a thorough investigation, nevertheless, the Activity Theory model provided this research with a clear framework for data collection and analysis, retaining a systemic view of the project while our discussions appeared flexible and broad ranging. Although the activity system provided a comprehensive overview of the professional relationship building process, specific aspects of the project did prompt us to step outside of this framework and focus on the transition 'bridges' as a means of fully understanding project impact. We did not exploit the potential of Activity Theory to the full. A development work research approach (Edwards et al. 2009) would have worked well with the participatory ethos of the project; however, this was not included in the initial project design so the necessary resources were not available to support this approach.

Conclusion

A number of implications for practice and policy emerge from the foregoing analysis and discussion. Firstly, the quality of professional relationships is paramount. Where resources are limited, interventions that encourage relationship building, such as locally provided, needs-based training should be seen as complementary – if not a viable alternative – to spending on teaching resources or peripatetic specialists. A focus on building social capital across institutions in this way can stimulate institutional learning and enhance the sense of agency among teachers which in turn supports individual learning.

This research appears to challenge the prevailing culture of competition among schools. Collaboration among subject specialists is demonstrably of value for those who might otherwise suffer professional isolation and structures that support this can pay dividends in terms of successful transitions between primary and secondary schools.

Finally, the data reinforces the need for clarity and consistency in approach in relation to MFL and its status in the curriculum. This will benefit current practice in schools as well as enhancing the long-term supply of appropriately trained teachers to support language instruction over the long term.

Note

1. Current advice such as the ALL Connect Transition Toolkit (2016) provides ideas spanning all five bridges.

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