

Creating Emotionally Healthy Learning Communities through Research Informed Partnerships

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Where have we been and where are we going?

Background

This paper details the intentional design and delivery of a research informed partnership between the charity Family Links and Canterbury Christ Church University. The aim of the partnerships is to improve social and emotional health and wellbeing for staff, students, pupils in schools and their parents. The partnership, now in its fifth year, has had a profound and positive impact on individuals and organisations, and is now moving to into a new phase with opportunities to broaden engagement and impact.

Introducing the Partners

Family Links is a national charity that believes every child and parent deserves the best chance in life. We enable parents and teachers to become more effective, caring and confident in raising and teaching emotionally resilient and socially competent children. Since 1997, Family Links has trained over 10,000 parent group leaders who in turn have reached over 120,000 parents. The Family Links education programmes 'The Nurturing Schools Network' has trained all staff in over 350 schools and over 4000 trainee teachers from six Initial Teacher Education providers.

The Nurturing Programme underpins the Family Links training activities. Developed by American child psychologist Dr Stephen J Bavolek, the programme is built around Four Constructs: self-awareness and self-esteem; appropriate expectations; positive discipline; and empathy. The Programme promotes social and emotional health and wellbeing for children, parents and teachers by recognising empathy as the cornerstone of all positive relationships.

The School of Teacher Education at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) has been collaborating with Family Links on a number of initiatives on initial teacher training pathways including Teach First, since 2009 (see project overview page 3). During that first year Family Links and CCCU jointly organised two days of workshops for Teach First primary pilot trainees. Some trainees indicated that putting in practice strategies shared during the workshops had a dramatic impact on their management of their classes and on outcomes for the children (Family Links, 2011).

Theories of motivation and research into the impact of social and emotional learning on pupil achievement, progress, well-being and long term mental health underpin the content of the partnership workshops. One key feature is the suggestion that participants prioritise their own emotional well-being in addition to that of the children. Being permitted and expected to consider their own emotional health and well-being and the impact this has on their own resilience and classroom relationships, provides trainees with an opportunity for reflection, refreshment and reorientation. Family Links currently provides training for all national Primary Teach First participants. Evaluation from follow up workshops has found that 98 per cent of participants attending agreed that the programme helped them support the emotional needs of pupils and effectively manage challenging behaviour, and 85 per cent were regularly using the approaches in their classroom at a six month follow up.

A Family Links/CCCU partnership project group was established in July 2013 to develop further opportunities for long term collaboration with on-going outcomes linked to research and knowledge transfer and staff/student exchange through internal and external dissemination opportunities. Project members include lecturers, students, family practitioners, teachers, researchers and Family Links leadership. Outcomes have included: partnership action research workshops and case studies; self-study; and the development of Masters Modules for the recently validated PG certificate in Social and Emotional Well-Being.

The partnership research workshops have led to a number of follow up action research case studies. These include a rural school interested in creating a more positive learning environment which has introduced a new approach to class and playground rules developed in class circle time, following a trial in a mixed aged year 1 / 2 class.

Another school is considering the impact of increasing staff awareness about the feelings and behaviours of pupils when managing behaviour interventions. The aim of this research is to raise pupil progress through a focus on empathy, understanding of emotional well-being and managing anger when dealing with challenging behaviour, both at playtime and when it enters the classroom.

One School Centred Initial Teacher Training (SCITT) programme research study has included an evaluation of trainee perceptions of the benefits of planning flexible groupings and work breaks into seminars to support student engagement and collaborative dialogue. This followed an end of year evaluation meeting when tutors discussed lack of engagement in some sessions, a tendency for some trainees to want to sit with the same groups of peers and feedback from trainees suggesting that they wished they been more proactive in building wider relationships within seminar groups during the year. This action research took the form of a lesson study approach. Tutors have subsequently shared the evaluations with the whole tutor team and are reviewing their planning and delivery in all sessions for flexible groupings. Tutors are continuing to evaluate the benefit of building in work breaks and are engaging in pedagogical discussions with the trainees about implications for their classroom practice in managing the emotional temperature of the learning space, following overwhelmingly positive feedback from the trainees.

- 'In the beginning I was horrified to think I would move around but I actually enjoyed it.'
- 'Useful for my self-confidence to be moved around in the classroom, as I had to engage with new people each time, when normally I would be scared to move around voluntarily.'

Family Links/CCCU Project lead, Wendy Cobb, recently completed linked research for her Masters dissertation on leadership, resilience and well-being. Reflecting on empowerment strategies for uncovering and nurturing leadership resilience, one outcome of her research was a self-coaching leadership resilience tool.

Overview of Partnership Activities and Impact

Initiative	Participants	Follow Up Impact
Family Links and CCCU organise training for Teach First Primary Pilot Trainees (2009)	Teach First Primary Participants 3 CCCU tutors	<i>'it was highly relevant to the contexts in which we are working in ... confronted issues which we are facing and offered practical responses'</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trainees report impact on classroom ethos for learning and pupil progress (Family Links, 2011) • Family Links subsequently provide training for all national Primary Teach First participants in the Nurturing Programme • Teach First teachers disseminate strategies and impact of FL strategies to CCCU newly qualified teachers (2013) <i>'Very worthwhile in terms of learning similar experiences and fears... It was really nice to look at behaviour in a positive manner...Excellent examples of strategies which I will use... Some very useful exchanges and real life examples... It was really comforting.. Gaining similar experiences – creating experiences to cope with behaviour'</i>
Family Links input on CCCU ITE programmes (2012, 2013, 2014)	UG and PG teacher trainees Newly Qualified Teachers	<i>'made me think more about giving children choices and using empathy to create secure and trusting relationships between ourselves and children in our class... made me realise how important it is to just sometimes stop (after considering the emotional temperature of the class!!) and play a quick fun game to revitalise and refocus everyone'</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation impact shared
Family Links 2 day Partnership Workshop at CCCU (2013) 1 day workshop (2013)	Workshop 1 16 CCCU primary and secondary phase ITE lecturers, link tutors, SEN and Behaviour leads 4 School Staff Workshop 2 7 School staff 2 CCCU tutors 1 Teacher Trainee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendees reflect on facilitation strategies for working with students • School attendees disseminate to school teams • 2 school staff attend 4 day FL parent group leader training • 3 CCCU tutors attend 4 day FL parent group leader training • Attendees share personal and family impact of participating in FL events
Family Links Presentation at CCCU Partnership Conferences (2013)	School Mentors, CCCU Link Tutors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Links Transforming Learning whole school INSET x 3 in CCCU partnership schools • Staff from further 2 schools attend Family Links parent group leader training • 2 CCCU Partnership Schools combine to begin leading parent groups (nurturing skills)
Family Links Project Group established (2013)	Family Links CCCU Faculty of Education Staff School Staff Trainee Teachers Voice specialist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project group support course review discussions • Sharing of research interests including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ parental engagement ○ social skills and anger management ○ low level behaviour ○ resilience and retention ○ staff and student emotional well-being • Participation extends across Faculty of Education • Prioritising our emotional health and well-being becomes standing item on project group meeting agenda
Family Links/CCCU Joint Action Research Workshops	CCCU staff School Staff Teacher Trainees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up action research projects in schools and on ITE programmes • Family Links and CCCU collaborate on the development of new social and emotional learning Masters Modules • Family Links support outcome focused research discussions across Faculty of Education

Taking the Project Forward

The existing collaboration between Family Links and CCCU aims to build on and further develop expertise across the university and wider partnership, including the dynamic work of the Research Centre for Children, Families and Communities to build a beacon area of excellence in the fields of social and emotional health and family partnerships. The work of the Family Links project crosses several Research Theme groups including: Children, Families and Communities; Professional, Organisational and Leadership Development; and Curriculum: Creativity and Innovation. It also aims to integrate teaching excellence with conducting research and knowledge exchange including building on existing and proposed Family Links longitudinal research partnerships aimed at improving systems and services for children and families frameworks (e.g. Simkiss et al, 2013; Colebrook Centre and Family Links, 2014).

In June 2015, Nick Haisman-Smith, CEO of the Family Links organisation, will be joining the Faculty of Education research theme group discussions leading an interactive session, *Making the Case for Putting Social and Emotional Health at the Heart of Learning*, which will provide a space for reflection on core values and exploring approaches for working together with students, schools and families. Critical discussions of the case for prioritising social and emotional health will also consider implications for organisational development, including opportunities to take forward discussion outcomes in the participants' roles as teacher educators, academics and through their work with families and children. Nick Haisman and Wendy Cobb propose to present the outcomes of these discussions, including next steps for the partnership and implications for other teaching training institutions, in a follow up paper.

Nick Haisman, Wendy Cobb and Judy Durrant (Faculty Director of Masters Programmes at CCCU) will be leading a two day workshop at Canterbury on 16th June and 23rd exploring key themes linked to positive partnerships with families through the lens of the Nurturing Programme.

For further information about the project, including dates of future FL/CCCU events, and the new Masters modules please email wendy.cobb@canterbury.ac.uk.

References and further reading

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