Increasing Competence through Collaborative Problem-Solving

Using Insight into Social and Emotional Factors in Children's Learning

Gerda Hanko

A David Fulton Book

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For simplicity alone (with no sexist implications) staff and children alike are referred to by the masculine pronoun

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Preface

This book is about the use of a specific collaborative problem-solving approach as part of a Continuing Professional Development policy. The national drive towards achieving academic excellence for all currently dominates educational debate and practice. The Teacher Training Agency (1998) states, as one of its principal aims, the promotion of effective and efficient professional development (since this) will have the maximum impact on pupils' learning. The Department for Education and Employment in its White Paper *Excellence in Schools* emphasises the importance of valuing and supporting teachers as 'going hand-in-hand [with] ensuring that the best methods available are used in every classroom in the country' (DfEE 1997a). Articles on Collaborative Models of Developing Competence have tried to 'identify those elements in managing the process of CPD that have made these initiatives effective' (Smith 1996). Creese, Norwich and Daniels surveyed the perceived usefulness of collaborative teacher groups in the special needs area, and, finding these groups 'clearly important at many different levels, most obviously in sustaining and increasing teacher morale and confidence, and thereby contributing to a positive ethos in the school' (Creese *et al.* 1998, pp. 109–114), suggest their wider use as desirable. Likewise, while earlier editions of my own book on Staff Support focused on the special emotional, behavioural and learning needs of some children, feedback from teachers led me to conclude the third edition (Hanko 1995) by recommending a collaborative problem-solving approach to staff development as a sound basis for implementing full curricular entitlement for all.

The DfEE emphasis on valuing and supporting teachers suggests an awareness of the difficulties involved in the task of raising all children's academic achievements when teachers themselves are suffering from previous unwittingly dysfunctional educational legislation. An excessively 'results'-centred teaching climate had devalued teachers' professionalism and severely reduced their opportunities to attend to that 'living link'*, the emotional and social factors which profoundly affect all children's learning. As Warnock (1996) fears, such a climate cannot but lead to academic failure for some. Others remind teachers of the part played by the emotions as offering 'a stimulation and enhancement of pupils' learning, [but] in negative form can be a killer of it' (Wragg 1997).

With growing recognition that 'the emotional development of children must continue to be a central concern for mainstream education' (DfE 1994), many teachers are now concerned that there is in current official documents little reference to its importance or to an 'affective curriculum' as the Elton Report (DES 1989) had advocated. Consequently, teachers have come to perceive the official view on quality in teaching and on achieving excellence as still an almost exclusively academic matter. In the light of complex social and educational problems, 'supporting teachers to ensure that the best methods are available for the achievement of all children's academic potential' (DfEE 1997a) will therefore require an approach to staff development that addresses the importance of the relationship between social/emotional development and academic progress at all stages of school attendance.

Collaborative staff development programmes – now envisaged in a DfEE (1998) Programme of Action – can assist teachers in responding more appropriately, as an integral part of their daily professional task, to the learning needs of pupils with emotional and behavioural problems. Teachers thereby found that almost imperceptibly their own professional development was promoted because it also enhanced their overall competence with all their pupils. This in turn assisted them in meeting current as well as evolving needs.

It therefore seems appropriate to extend the material I have been able to offer to date, to take it beyond the special needs context, and to focus on the extent to which a well structured school-based or school-focused collaborative support network can help teachers to attend to the affective/social dimension of an academic curriculum, to aid all pupils learning. (Some parts of the text are derived from the third edition of my book on Staff Development (Hanko 1995)).

*To docket living things past any doubt
You cancel first the living spirit out.
The parts lie in the hollow of your hand,
You only lack the living link you banned.

Goethe, *Faust* (transl. Philip Wayne Penguin, 1949)

Gerda Hanko
London
November 1998

Introduction

Teachers are deeply concerned with their pupils as people but may be unaware of some of their pupils' hidden needs which they may not recognise. A majority of children may lead a relatively uncomplicated life which allows them to enjoy what their teachers can offer them. Many others do not. Where teachers are aware of problems, however, they may be convinced that there is little they can do about it ('we are not trained that way') or feel that this is not part of their remit ('we are not social workers or psychologists').

They may be baffled by talented teenagers who are failing to develop their talents, or be unaware of those gifted children who already in Year 1 'take careful deceptive measures to hide their giftedness, like conforming to the class norm by pretending they can't read, pretending not to know the answers to questions, holding back from classroom discussion' (Freeman 1996, see also Eyre 1997). Teachers may worry, feel frustrated or despondent about the quiet child who refuses to respond to their efforts of inviting participation (Collins 1996), or those who are 'absent without leaving, playing truant in mind' (Collins 1998a). There are the undiscovered targets of bullying of which not even their parents are aware (nobody knew of Vijay's ordeal until after his suicide, the teenager who never missed a day at school, wrote an excellent essay on bullying for which his teacher gave him a merit mark without realising what his essay was really about (Boseley 1997).

There are those who at playtime suffer deeply from being ostracised or from being just less popular, who go through crises in peer relationships which carry over into lesson time, while others are burdened with feelings and responsibilities that arise from living with a severely impaired member of the family or a chronically sick sibling (which may lead to early competence or childhood deprivation). According to a 1997 survey (Anthony Clare, BBC Radio 4, 7.10.1998) 23% of all children, and 20% of primary school children experience this situation. Over 125,000 children have a parent in prison (see Tony's case, pp.19–24) but shame often forces them to hide the fact (Williams 1998) (also Redwood 1998). There are those worried about family break up and about their parents' preoccupation with their own difficulties 'leading to less expressive parent–child relationships (and/or) rebellion towards changing family situations' (Pagani *et al.* 1998).

There are those who still grieve over past bereavement ('he will have got over it by now'), or are worried about family break up. There are the multiple-school attenders ranging from Forces children from otherwise stable families to 'looked after' children in care and children from traumatised refugee families. There are the isolated childhoods where we don't ask (W. H. Auden's *Unknown Citizen* 'Are they free, are they happy? The question is absurd. Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard') until we hear of the lonely childhoods of the murderous Dunblane and Hungerford perpetrators. There are the disaffected 'middle achievers' whose poor basic skills impede their enjoyment. And there are those whose 'aggressive or withdrawn facade may mask constant misery, loneliness, self-loathing and fear (Yapp 1991, see also Graham and Hughes 1995). Symptoms of depression, when externalised, tend 'not to be seen' as such by teachers or parents (Graham and Hughes 1995, Puura *et al.* 1998), and, where externalised as oppositional behaviour, may 'mask their cognitive competence' to the children themselves and to their teachers (cf. Fagot and Leve 1998). Without an understanding of the emotional aspect of defiance, teachers may dismiss the defiance of insecurely attached children as 'mere attention-seeking' rather than seeing in it a possible longing for gaining control over at least something in their lives (Barkley 1997) – a wish for control which sensitive teaching could well deflect into the learning task (Hanko 1994).

The specific joint problem-solving approach presented here, is about the rich diversity of professional expertise which can be enhanced in every school, and about the wide range of needs to be met in every classroom. It is about the sharing process that, by maximising existing expertise, can help teachers to respond more appropriately to those needs in order to achieve that 'excellence for all' which schools are expected to aim for.

The approach has been developed in response to the multiplying demands from teachers to receive the kind of support that will help them to meet pupils' emotional and social needs within a normal teaching day, through curriculum content and delivery, teacher–pupil and classroom relationships and the involvement of parents as partners. This approach has been welcomed by schools in many parts of the country (as well as in other parts of Europe) as a model for the development of in-service support systems, eliciting teachers' hidden skills to motivate 'difficult' children with re-educative challenges, demonstrating how a sensitive curricular response can not only help to meet the emotional and social learning needs of specific children, but can enhance the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom as a whole (Mongon and Hart 1989). Who said it first that so-called 'problem children' are like other children, only more so?

It is hardly surprising that teachers who have been helped to deepen their understanding and to respond more appropriately to the behavioural, emotional and learning needs of those pupils who confronted them with particular difficulties have also found that emotional and social factors affect not only

failure to learn but play a part in all learning. Promoting such insight, and enabling teachers to apply such insight in the daily process of teaching and learning, would therefore appear to be at a premium, whatever their pupils' achievement.

How does continuing *collaborative* problem-solving assist *individual* teachers in enhancing their competence for meeting the diverse learning needs of their pupils? The relevant issues relate to professional development and militating obstacles such as the difficulties that teachers experience in identifying their own needs and in optimising existing provision. Providers may experience difficulty in gearing their provision to the context in which teachers work, to be of both *immediate* and *long-term* use in the classroom and school setting. How to offer this in such a way that it is usable and acceptable while maintaining teachers' professional autonomy, and to ascertain who might be in a position – whether within the school or external to it – of initiating staff development groups and possess the professional skills required from effective supporters is an additional challenge.

Genuinely collaborative provision rules out prescriptive advice and intrusive exhortations on what a school or a teacher should do, as fundamentally ineffective. Instead, it recognises, appreciates and builds on teachers' existing strengths and expertise. Ultimately, it creates conditions favourable to finding workable solutions and produces a climate of commitment and mutual respect in which the teachers themselves, as individuals and as a genuinely collaborative team, implement their conclusions and observe and consider what needs evolve.

Teachers welcome such viable support. To ensure such viability, for the benefit of all children regardless of attainment, a range of questions needs to be asked. How aware are we as teachers of the factors that influence children's learning; of the perception which children, their parents and teachers themselves have of each other; and of the effect that these can have on work in the classroom? How much insight into emotional and social factors in learning and their link with learning needs can be of help to teachers in mainstream schools and therefore ought to be made available to them? How can they, often so overworked and under stress, best acquire such insight and information so that they are of immediate and long-term use to them and to the children? What skills do those who offer support to teachers need themselves, to be able to extend those of their teaching colleagues?

Norwich invites us to consider children's educational needs as falling into three groups: those needs which are common to all, those which are common to some, and those which are unique to each individual (Norwich 1996b, 1998; O'Brien 1998a, b). An education system charging its teachers with helping all children without fear or favour to learn to the best of their potential, will have to accommodate all three. Accepting 'emotional development as a central concern for mainstream education' (DfE 1994), and acknowledging that emotional and social factors play a part in every child's learning, requires

teachers, as an integral part of their task, to examine how best they can hold in balance commonality and difference with regard to emotional and social needs.

Such hidden needs as listed above hinder children's learning and, if they remain unmet, worsen as they further impede progress. There are also general behaviour problems, not themselves expressive of deep-seated needs, which teachers need to deal with to benefit the personal development and educational progress of all. Teachers may, however, be baffled by children who seem to obstruct their best efforts to help, and be made to feel useless, not understanding what underlying needs the behaviour expresses. They may find some behaviour provoking reactions in them which increase rather than reduce the problem. They may fall back on defensive encounters with disaffected pupils who may then continue, in what may seem to them an ongoing war, to indicate their needs in 'unmanageable' ways which educational institutions, and indeed, society, must find unacceptable. This may lead to exclusion.

Teachers may blame the children and their background for their difficulties, see the problem as located in the child, in his family and home or in the child's situation at school, in conflict with what is expected of him. They may feel that official demands and pressures in the system are interfering with their ability to respond adequately to such children's needs and indeed 'may lead to academic failure for some' (Warnock 1996). Either way, they may feel that they have to handle the difficulties predominantly in terms of control, feel compelled to resort to merely coping, which they may themselves despise but which allows them to keep going at a reduced level of functioning and a growing level of stress. As the Elton Report (DES 1989) had shown, many teachers battle on without the professional and emotional support which they could receive from those trained to offer it. Many children whom teachers could in fact help within their *educational* remit and the constraints of the system, tend not to receive the help to which they would in all probability have been able to respond. Thus, teachers could be spared much distress, and much waste of emotional and educational potential could be prevented, if some of the principles, pedagogical procedures and practical support skills would be made generally available to them.

These will be the twin issues to be addressed in the chapters that follow. Part I studies offer insight into the social and emotional aspects of children's learning, and show that their importance must be recognised and be harnessed to professional competence. Then the principles are discussed of a collaboratively consultative problem-solving approach, geared to such competence. The framework of that approach is described in relation to the different theoretical bases and practices employed and their relevance to school practicalities. Examples of case discussions in a range of school-based settings will show how teachers, through skilled sharing of their experience, learned to contribute to their colleagues' and their own expertise and became more aware of how communication processes become most effective.

Part II shows how the daily curriculum, ordinary classroom and school

procedures are used to address children's emotional and social realities as a source of learning experiences relevant to the needs of all pupils. This is followed by a section on effective collaboration with parents and by one on cooperation between institutions and services.

Part III offers guidelines for initiating and developing collaborative training groups in a variety of settings and summarises the possibilities of a joint problem-solving approach for meeting the needs of both teachers and pupils. It addresses the question of 'Who supports the supporters?' and deals with the training and support needs of those in a position to develop this work, such as staff development tutors from training institutions and schools, a school's in-service, special needs, pastoral care or curriculum coordinators, other colleagues accepted as having advanced skills in supporting their fellow professionals, mentors charged with the induction of new teachers, members of the psychological and education support services, specialist schools staff engaged in outreach work, or independent providers. All of these may be able or could be enabled to share their skills and understanding in a way that can be applied by teachers as an integral part of their professional task of attending to the range of needs in their classrooms.

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PART I

Enriching the Learning Environment for Pupils and Teachers: Maximising Existing Expertise

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