

They learn more working in tandem

It's relationships forged in schools, not systems, inspections and league tables, that will bring pupils success



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Learning is something best done by children and with them, and only occasionally to and for them.

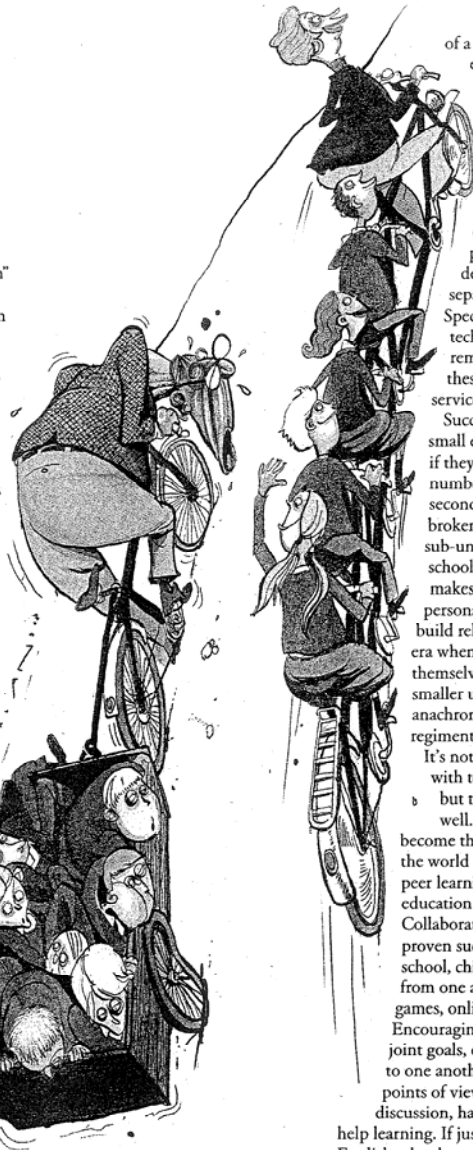
Sometimes learning comes from instruction and guidance from a teacher. Invariably it is successful only when it becomes a collaborative and, as children grow older, an independent undertaking, which they can manage for themselves.

So, if the simple idea of learning "with and by" rather than "to and from" was put at the heart of integrated children's services, what would it mean for the shape of our schools, family support services and policies for learning beyond school? The answer – according to the innovative schools and authorities that are working towards learning as mainly a "with" activity – is that children of all ages need to be supported by relationships that motivate them to learn. But often what they get are poorly co-ordinated services that are delivered to them.

The idea of putting relationships – rather than systems, inspections and league tables – at the heart of education policy would provide a new goal not just for schools, but also the family services, vocational and community learning programmes that make up children's services. The goal should be to ensure that children are supported by relationships – with teachers, peers, family members and mentors – that motivate them to participate in learning because they feel cared for and that their achievements and ambitions are recognised. Schools and children's services should be designed around that goal.

Schools that are leading the way in personalising learning put much greater emphasis on social and emotional support through one-to-one mentoring and emotional resilience programmes. At Cramlington Community High School in Northumberland, every pupil will next year have a personalised learning plan and an e-portfolio where they can record their progress. A new Year 7 and 8 curriculum has been designed to embed "learning to learn" early on.

Smaller institutions – or at least



institutions that feel more intimate – make it easier for children to build relationships that support their learning. Cramlington, which will have 2,200 pupils from September, will be split into two smaller "learning villages", catering for the junior and senior schools, so that pupils feel part

of a smaller community even in a large school. The Leigh Technology Academy in Dartford, Kent, has been broken down into four smaller schools, each with its own principal and dedicated staff in separate blocks. Specialist areas of technology, arts and PE remain. Staff from these departments service each school.

Successful schools feel small even if they cater for a large number of children. Large secondaries should be broken up into smaller sub-units. Creating smaller schools-within-schools makes it easier to personalise learning and build relationships. In an era when firms tend to break themselves down into smaller units, schools seem anachronistic for their regimentation and scale.

It's not just relationships with teachers that count, but those with peers as well. England should become the first country in the world to make peer-to-peer learning central to its education system. Collaborative learning is a proven success. Outside school, children often learn from one another through games, online and off.

Encouraging children to pursue joint goals, explain themselves to one another, express different points of view through discussion, have all been found to help learning. If just 1 per cent of the English school population became pupil-tutors, that would be 70,000 children.

Following the success of the Expert Patient Programme in health, which is designed to equip people to self-manage long-term conditions more effectively, we should introduce a national Peer Learner Programme in education. When a child leaves school, they should be asked not just what

they got in their exams, but in which subjects they most liked to act as a tutor for other children.

Supporting relationships for learning would provide a shared goal for recently created integrated children's services. About 140,000 families in the UK are officially judged to be "at risk of social exclusion". Children growing up in families suffering a combination of poverty, dislocation and depression often do not have relationships that encourage learning. And public services do not get to them early enough with integrated approaches tailored to family circumstances, which leaves schools to pick up the pieces.

A new generation of integrated family support services is needed, in which advisers work with families to develop self-directed support plans that families can enact with a personal budget. Early evaluations of such programmes in social care show that people enjoy a higher quality of life – often at lower cost than traditional in-house services – because they can create solutions to suit their needs.

Finally, policy would need to address the provision of relationships for learning in communities, not just schools and families. Schools need to be able to draw on community resources for learning. Rochdale has produced a directory of wider learning opportunities so that schools are aware of the alternative provision available across the community.

The next stage of workforce reform should focus on the creation of community-based teachers (CBTs) to expand the range of settings in which learning is possible. A CBT would be accredited to teach, but not necessarily as a qualified school teacher. They could work in the community to provide lessons at a workplace, in a library or at their own home. CBTs would allow more children to learn more, more informally, in learning spaces between school and home.

The main challenge facing schools in the UK is how to motivate the most disaffected children to participate in learning. The key to that is providing them with relationships that motivate them to learn. We will only crack the most intractable education system problems if we focus on relationships as the route to higher standards for all.

● Charles Leadbeater's report "What's Next? 21 Ideas for 21st century Learning" can be found at www.innovation-unit.co.uk