



## SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PARTNERSHIP

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## **Abstract**

A partnership of schools, researchers and consulting institutions is currently engaged in enacting a fundamental change in upper secondary education (roughly equivalent to 'high school' in the US) in the Netherlands.

This change was initiated by APS National Centre for School Improvement based on its experience with whole school improvement. A few outlines were formulated ("fresh ideas") regarding the field of education (knowledge production by students, recognition of talent), the non-linear nature of a developmental process requiring cooperation with schools, and the on-site monitoring by researchers. A new partnership undertook the commitment to get this job done.

Fundamental change implies disturbance and imbalance, which influence each partner differently and affect the partnership (Engeström, 1987). Collective learning can be considered as one way to prevent disintegration or a complete breakdown (Dixon, 2002). The change process is also seen as embedded in the context, consisting of dynamic cycles, feedback loops and interdisciplinary collaboration (Gibbons, et al., 1994).

This report encompasses three years of collaborative efforts in an ongoing change process, and is focused on the development of fresh educational ideas within two secondary schools and the communication within the partnership. It demonstrates the results of implementing new concepts in practice by means of the relationship between school and coaches. It also shows how hard it is to keep the communication going between partners who are mainly focused on what they perceive as their "core business" and the culture of each partner organization. It appears to be uncommon that the information generated by the researchers is used for decision-making in the development process. It does, however, reveal the beginnings of mutual learning based on research findings within the partnership that resembles the "intensified contacts" in the life of a research project (Huberman, 1990), and this gives only a glimmer of the collective learning that was the original objective of the partnership.

## 1. Context

APS has been a leading actor in the renewal and innovation of Dutch education for three decades. Apart from regular assignment-based training and consultancy work, which brings in more than 50% of the turnover, a substantial part is subsidized by the Dutch government's Department of Education. To support the recent changes in educational policy, APS has been invited (along with other organizations) to bid for assistance in developing schools and other educational settings. APS's 'think tank' in charge of the reform projects has been successful in linking with innovative forces within the Department of Education to allow for development based on broad outlines within an open, collaborative process with partner schools (Gibbons, et al., 1994). Several reform projects are planned and/or continued in this way each year, one of them being a project to improve independent learning in the upper secondary (college preparatory) school. These projects are a response to the stagnating innovation in the *studiehuis* or independent study centre, a term used to designate the system of independent and interdisciplinary learning facilitated by teachers, legislated in the mid-nineties. This legislation did give rise to many school-based experiments, most of which fizzled out, mainly because the subject-based national examination system was still perceived as the real assessment tool, especially by many parents. This restriction limited the scope of secondary schools interested in "breaking-the-mold" designs (Bodilly, 2001). Moreover, the lack of capacity of most schools for engaging in and successfully going through a complex change process, coupled with most teachers' sense of "losing" their core task, contributed to the stagnation in many change endeavors (Hargreaves, 2004).

This study focuses on two site-based school development processes for enhancing independent student learning and motivation, and a wider variety of methods and procedures to actively acquire and construct relevant knowledge. APS found two interested secondary schools (no subsidies/grants for the schools) and contracted researchers from a university institute to form a partnership for developing good practice within a time frame of 3 to 4 years. The preliminary talks started in early 2002 and evolved into the development of "fresh" concepts by means of interviews with key figures within APS and senior coaches who were to play a role with the future partner schools.

The second focus of this study is the collaboration between the partners: school, coaches and researchers. The various cooperation processes result in differing views on the development that can enhance the process and the results.

## 2. Areas of reference

In this study, two sets of references are used:

1. School development: The focus is the development of a “fresh” concept consisting of ideas designed to match schooling with contemporary perceptions of the role of knowledge, skills or competencies, the importance of the labor market, and young people growing up in a changing social context.
2. Partnership: The focus is on developing collective learning within organizations, to close the gap between research and practice in order to produce mutually beneficial results.

### (1) School Development

The term “fresh” learning was introduced to refer to fundamentally new, or even groundbreaking, concepts of looking at education and schooling (Bodilly, 2001; Gibbons et al., 1994, Schoenfeld, 1999). Within a school, fresh learning can have major consequences on collaboration between teachers, project team coordinators, school leadership and the community (Handy, 1980, Petri & Burkhardt, 1994). Additionally, a consideration of research on whole school reform within a five-year time frame would not appear to be ill-advised (Fullan, 1994, Berends et al., 2002).

The premises behind the development in the two schools (Thomas College and the Simon Institute) can be summarized as follows (Bordier et al., 2005):

- learning, not teaching
- student as colleague instead of recipient of knowledge
- flexible, extended schedules
- interdisciplinary meaningful projects called “achievements”
- integration of information technology
- identification of talent and ‘talent-scouting’
- cooperative learning
- national frameworks (esp. examinations)

The premises are broken down into integrated “achievement projects” facilitated by a key teacher/tutor and subject teachers; small groups of students have a choice of tasks, including real-life tasks (the city council wants a report on traffic circulation, a report of local pollution needs looking into), work in a time frame of 2-4 weeks, and present their findings to their fellow students, teachers and parents/community members.

The development of this concept into specific models and practices will be a mixture of elements both in and outside of the school, as illustrated below (based on Gibbons et al., 1994):

- Outside the school  
Concepts/models are theoretical, based on experiments & research  
Development and implementation is a planned process  
Congruency, internal consistency is important  
Problems are solved using existing knowledge
- Inside the school  
Concepts are developed within the context of the schools  
Development is a cyclic, dynamic process

Various models are accepted within a concept  
Multi-disciplinary approach to problem-solving  
Developments from outside are adopted, where useful

In this study, differences in development at the two schools are linked to the context, the internal organization, the relationship with coaches and the use of data feedback.

## (2) Partnership

To close the gap between researchers and practitioners (school people) we built on the following experiences:

- the reflections based on a study on implementation of classroom learning: the importance of connecting with a client, the impact of intervention in the culture, the handling of top-down tensions, and the need for a non-linear process (De Vries & Petri, 2002).
- the tensions between the program-based requirements of an innovation and teachers' needs (Tung & Feldman, 2001, 2002), and a method for understanding the tensions through monitoring of both teachers and coaches.
- The "critical friend" approach: practiced on a small scale at APS, for evaluating the work of a peer over an extended period (1-2 years) by peer interviews with school people and coach followed by reviewing these interviews in a joint session (Pouw, Van Werkhoven, & Petri, 2002).

Combining these two sets of reference, coaches will encounter one serious implication for the implementation of external change programs that can be formulated as a hypothesis:

"the fresher the design, the bigger the risk of not meeting the needs of the teachers in the school."

The partnership approach as described in this paper is a way of minimizing this risk. Partnership is a key concept in the developmental process as described below. Partners agree to collaborate based on their expertise, with a working process and working procedures characterized by mutual understanding, learning and experimentation. Collective learning will be a central feature (Dixon, 2002), and the characteristic relationship to the "object" of each partner is acknowledged (Engeström, 1987). The coaches of APS see the school people as their clients, the school sees the learning of their students as their task, and the researchers see the monitoring of the process as their job. For example: the feedback of the research findings (during the process) informs the school about progress and informs the coaches about their impact on teachers, and the ongoing communication serves as feedback to the researchers (e.g. "how useful is this data?"). This process makes the people within the partnership vulnerable: they have to take feedback and reflect on it in their own group as well as in combined sessions.

In this "learning by expanding" model (Engeström, 1987), progress hinges on "issues," topics that are seen in a different way by the partners or within one of the partners. Issues are seen as crucial in the development: it can result in resistance or unsolvable problems, or it can be resolved in new directions. The process of observing, interpreting and resolving issues triggers learning with each partner or within the partnership. It is seen as "collective learning through the collective proximate zones."

Examples of issues that can arise in the process, as seen from the perspective of APS:

- Coaches feel responsible for the implementation of the fresh school concept in the school  
-as opposed to-  
Coaches, school and researcher share responsibility for the development of this concept.
- Coaches are the facilitators and trainers, the school is developing their practice and the researcher conducts the monitoring  
-as opposed to-  
Coaches, school and researcher interact, based on their professionalism, to develop the concept into practice.

Examples of issues that can arise, as seen from the perspective of the school:

- The school leadership feels responsible for the development of the new concept of learning  
-as opposed to-  
Students feels responsible for their learning, regardless of the concept.
- The school develops its own practice/routine, the students perform their tasks and a researcher reports the findings  
-as opposed to-  
The school, including the students, coaches and researcher exercise co-development in the implementation of a new educational concept.

### 3. Timeframe, Methods, and Nature of Research

2002 (Initial stage): researchers did interviews with coaches (8), the think tank coordinator, an APS director who supervises the think tank, and a few senior coaches acting as a support group. Main question: what are the current issues? Issues appeared to revolve around educational innovation and strategy (while the function of research did not). In a feedback session with the support group & think tank coordinator, collective learning came out as a useful concept.

Before the summer break, coaches initiated preliminary talks with two schools looking for support in developing their ideas. Both schools had an innovative core, including some or all of the management and teachers performing small-scale tryouts and experiments with elements corresponding to the coaches' "fresh" concepts and views.

#### School year 2002/2003

Thomas College started the term with an all-staff conference to discuss their concepts and ways of putting it into practice. Talks were also started with the students (4<sup>th</sup> grade (secondary school), which is the equivalent of 12<sup>th</sup> grade (high school) in the American system) about new expectations and how to restructure lessons. Teachers worked on redesigning their lessons, first in subject departments and later that school year in "achievement project" design groups. At the end of the term, 4<sup>th</sup> grade students worked on "achievement projects" and liked it. It was decided to establish "achievement projects" in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade during school year 2003/2004. The coaches, facilitating the process and concept development, were regularly present in the school during this year. According to the school, one issue became apparent: the tension between final examinations and the achievement assessment. The coaches acknowledge this issue without having solutions for it, as became clear in a shared session at the end of May with school people, coaches and researcher.

The cooperation was mainly directed at finding practical solutions as opposed to starting out with a theory or an established good practice. Therefore the coordinator of the school expressed interest in monitoring the progress towards improvement. This project was important to some people in the school, but it was not the only one: some 20 small projects and initiatives were being developed, some facilitated by another consultancy firm.

The Simon Institute did some experimentation with similar concepts and started talks with coaches at the end of this school year. The concepts of the coaches were well-received, and a new project fit in with the plans already made for school year 2002/2003. A kick-off conference early September involved 13 teachers in designing "achievement projects" in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. These experiences led to a design of an "achievement project" in 5 weekly periods in school year 2003/2004. The concepts and practices were seen as developments by themselves, and accepted reasonably well across the entire school.

**METHODS:** open interviews on topics – up to 2 hrs.; analysis of school reports and various minutes & notes; feedback sessions with interview subjects.

School year 2003/2004

Thomas College and Simon Institute started their experiments with “achievement projects.” Two coaches at each school were regularly present to clarify concepts, link practices with the concepts and oversee the process. They collaborated with teachers, school leadership and project coordinators.

At the end of this school year, the schools met to share experiences; participation of teachers, assessment and the role of the coaches were important topics. For teachers at Thomas College, often experiences did not help enough, and the teachers did not like having to “face problems and solve them” instead of being offered good practices or “assisted performance.” Teachers at the Simon Institute viewed the coaches (sometimes) as too concept-driven, which more often than not upset their more pragmatic view. Overall, the schools were keen to continue and to work with the coaches!

The researchers did not visit the school; they verified their findings by working with the think tank coordinator and offered their findings and suggestions in a report near the end of December 2003. The think tank coordinator was not pleased with the delay and was skeptical about the potential of collective learning. In his view, the researchers offered promising concepts on collective learning within school developmental processes and provided an abundance of data and descriptions in the case studies, but did not deliver the issues that had to be shared by the partners. It was not clear to the partners how to handle collective learning, because the researchers did not connect well, neither with the people in the schools nor with the coaches, and temporary changes in the availability of researchers was a source of irritation. On the other hand, the researchers felt the coaches were little interested in the research, connected as they were with “their” school. The 3<sup>rd</sup> stage of collective learning, “interpretation of findings,” had not even been touched on (Dixon, 2002). In early 2004, the think tank coordinator and the research coordinator decided to end the relationship.

The think tank coordinator tried to pick up the pieces, and when, at a joint meeting with the coaches of both schools in January, two different strategies emerged, resuming the research made sense. A decision was made to commission this task to a researcher who had previously worked for the think tank in a similar developmental context. Because of this researcher's availability issues, this research only started at the end of April.

**METHODS:** open interviews (topics gathered from earlier reports) with school leadership/coordinator and coaches; questionnaires (17 items) administered to teachers (based on previous comparable research) – 4-point scale, with open-ended questions (full report available on request: a.m.de.vries@ppsw.rug.nl).

## School year 2004/2005

Thomas College and the Simon Institute continued their projects.

Research was conducted early fall; this resulted in the (1<sup>st</sup>) Report: Strategy & Results.

Feedback on 1<sup>st</sup> report, mid-November, to the coordinator of team of coaches; the overall picture is favorable: concepts are well-received, and show the coaches' effectiveness.

Feedback on the report to the team of coaches, early February, resulted in a new research question (2005): ownership of the educational reform; the criteria were identified in a coaches' brainstorming session.

At Thomas College, the management wanted to use the results of this coming study for decision making and planning of school year 2005/2006. It was conducted with help from students (as an "achievement project"), feedback was received in May 2005, and the study affirmed broad support for continuation. The leadership at Simon Institute had already decided to continue the innovation and postponed the research to the fall of 2005/2006.

**METHODS:** Interviews with coordinator and leadership, questionnaire for teachers and questionnaire for students (conducted by students at Thomas College).

Questionnaire (4-point scale) based on the interviews with coordinators and school management to identify favorable and limiting factors (full report available: a.m.devries@ppsw.rug.nl).

## School year 2005/2006

Thomas College continued the projects and the relationship with the coaches. The Simon Institute decided to cooperate with the coaches until January 1<sup>st</sup> 2006, and then continue on their own.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> study (ownership) was conducted at Simon College in the fall of 2005; the teacher's response to the questionnaire was moderate; interviews with the school leadership were only partly carried out (at their request). The findings were sent to the school by mail.

Coaches received the 2<sup>nd</sup> study reports in early February and responded to the think tank coordinator at his request. A feedback/reflection session with coaches, think tank coordinator and researcher is planned for next April.

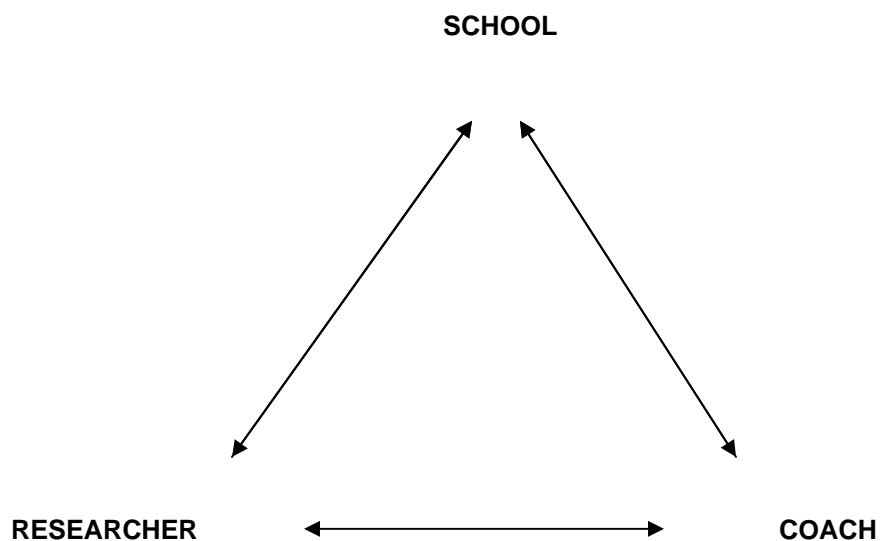
## Nature of this Study

A case study; descriptive and exploratory.

The goal of this study is to describe the relation partnership and school development.

The partnership's goal is to enhance school development through collective learning, and to create "second loop learning" through feedback of site-based research and tacit knowledge (Kolb, 1984).

FIGURE : Partners and relations



The data is made available for the partnership; each partner has its own way of distributing the information in their "home" organization, under conditions of confidentiality. The data is used in communication sessions between researchers, coaches and/or think tank coordinator, between researchers and school and between school and coaches.

#### 4. Area of reference: School development

##### Findings of first Study

After the initial stage (2002/2003), in which the partners formulated and discussed their intentions and set plans, the two schools (Thomas College and Simon Institute) started their experiment in school year 2003/2004. Differences soon emerged: the Simon Institute, the management exhibited more cohesion in comparison to the other school. Moreover, the Simon Institute organized their “achievement projects” in one two-week session and three one-week sessions for the relevant students (4<sup>th</sup> year of secondary school (note: qualifying examination after 6<sup>th</sup> grade), while Thomas College organized their “achievement projects” the whole year round: 4 half-day periods per week for the 4<sup>th</sup> year students (2 classes, 25 students). To ensure the continuity of student work in these periods and the relationship with regular classes, special key teachers/tutors were assigned.

Goals of this study:

1. the characteristics of the school’s strategy for developing “achievement projects”
2. to present a progress report in July 2004
3. factors that link strategy to current situation.

A selection of findings of the schools are summarized below:

|  | <b>Thomas College</b>   | <b>Simon Institute</b>   |
|--|---|--|
| <b>Current situation 2003-2004</b>                           |   |  |
| Schedule and available teachers for achievement projects and | - 4 half-day sets each week<br>- 3 key teachers/tutors and some subject teachers  | - 5 achievements weeks in a year<br>- each achievement project: 2 lead subject teachers<br>- 6 teachers/tutors |
| Task   | Open process of discovery   | Open and structured  |
| Grades   | Abolished   | In use   |
| Initiative   | project leader, school leader, key teacher/tutors   | Project leader, school management  |
| Questionnaire  | Filled out by all teachers  | Filled out by 4 teachers   |
| Context  | - lower on student numbers<br>- recent mergers<br>- high degree of small experiments  | - routine-driven staff<br>- decreasing student numbers<br>- highly regarded school                             |
| Start of process   | - many discussions on design; choice is important<br>- 2 weeks try-out, 8 teachers did planning, very detailed<br>- positive experience | - 13 teachers; enthusiasm<br>- dissatisfaction with coaches<br>- small individual experiments                  |

|                           |  |  |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| In operation<br>2003-2004 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- design premises prevail</li> <li>- open tasks</li> <li>- problems after 3 months: no coherence, no structure, low on knowledge</li> <li>- structuring of subject areas, alternative assessment design</li> <li>- project coordinator takes the lead</li> <li>- strong support for continuation</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- pragmatism prevails</li> <li>- all subjects involved</li> <li>- well-prepared projects</li> <li>- knowledge important</li> <li>- variations in knowledge</li> <li>- continuation taken for granted</li> </ul> |
| <b>Organization</b>       |  |  |
| Project coordinator       | Not in school leadership   | School leader  |
| Communication             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- mainly within key teachers/tutors</li> <li>- teachers satisfied with information</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- all people involved</li> <li>- individual support in case of problems</li> </ul>  |
| Professional development  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- all teachers involved (20) at staff retreats</li> <li>- on-the-job coaching</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- all teachers</li> </ul>   |
| Subject departments       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- wide range of attention to project</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- full participation</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Evaluation</b>         |  |  |
| Frequency                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ad hoc base</li> <li>- spring conference for teachers, parents and students</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- grades the end of each "achievement project" week</li> </ul>  |
| Attitude towards project  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- positive and motivated key teachers</li> <li>- doubts about knowledge base</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- positive feelings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- doubts about acquisition of knowledge</li> </ul> </li> </ul>   |
| <b>Role coaches</b>       |  |  |
| Continuity                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 2 coaches</li> <li>- some personnel changes had no consequences</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 2 coaches</li> <li>- early replacements needed, causing delays</li> </ul>   |
| Impact                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- coaches supported participant's view to disseminate project as a next step</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- limitation to 5 weeks was viewed skeptically by coaches at first</li> </ul>   |
| Communication             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- at first, many contacts with teachers; subsequently dropped off</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- continuous contact with key teachers</li> </ul>   |
| Judgment by school        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- positive, esp. on the degree of freedom</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- positive, esp. on degree of freedom</li> </ul>  |

|                                    |  |  |
|------------------------------------|--|--|
|                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- expected more ready-made practices</li> <li>- teachers wanted examples of good practice</li> <li>- feelings that concepts were imposed early on</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- at first, some sense that APS would use the experience for own marketing purposes</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Issues</b>                      |  |  |
|                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- lack of coherence at the skills level</li> <li>- lack of knowledge</li> <li>- not enough structure</li> <li>- assessment</li> <li>- participation of subject teachers</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- knowledge</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Intentions for continuation</b> |  |  |
|                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- no teacher can get out of the project</li> <li>- continuation of the design, more tightly structured</li> <li>- coaching for subject teachers</li> <li>- subject time decrease in favor of design of tasks</li> <li>- move back to using grades</li> <li>- more prominent role of subjects in achievements tasks</li> <li>- more attention for assessment</li> <li>- design of “mastery of subjects areas”</li> <li>- scheduled staff workshops for improvement &amp; design</li> <li>- stronger project leadership</li> <li>- ultimate goal: learning by achievements</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- all teachers have to participate</li> <li>- continuation of two key subject teachers leading the achievement project</li> <li>- achievement project week each 7th week during school year</li> <li>- test week right before the achievement projects</li> <li>- new criteria for testing</li> <li>- gradual integration into the curriculum (like coupling regular schoolwork with achievements’ tasks)</li> <li>- ultimate goal: 30% will be achievement projects</li> </ul> |

### Concluding remarks

#### 1. Strategy

Both schools developed the concept into practice assisted by the coaches. Both schools appreciated the room given by the coaches to interpret the premises and concepts of the coaches. Co-development seems to be the right thing in this situation.

Thomas College gave evidence of searching for the right concept by handling the project more in depth and by experimenting with a selected group of teachers for a whole year.

They asked the students to engage in an “exploration” type of project. Simon College involved all teachers because of its school-wide organization of the projects and the more structured nature of its projects.

## 2. Current situation

At Thomas College, 4<sup>th</sup> grade students work on their tasks for 2 days a week facilitated and guided by 3 key teachers/tutors and, to a lesser degree, relevant subject teachers. The full staff is kept informed on an occasional basis by the key teachers/tutor. Only a small group of teachers feels ownership, and what happens in the projects is hardly noticed in regular classes. Portfolios to assess the “achievement projects” were introduced and were met with criticism from parents. In response, the school and coaches developed the concept of “mastery of subject areas” to prepare for the final examinations. The role of knowledge and assessment is nevertheless felt as an issue.

At Simon College, students work on the project in 5 different weeks, spread throughout the school year, facilitated by 5 key teachers/tutors and all subject teachers. A larger group of teachers is motivated and regularly integrate project characteristics into their classroom teaching. The achievement projects show a mixture of choice and structure for the students. Knowledge and assessment appear to be an issue as well; however, this school did not abolish the grading system.

## 3. Relationship strategy and current situation

Two factors mark the main difference between these schools: the degree of pragmatism and the independence from the coaches and/or concept. Thomas College was more into an “ideal” concept close to the one the coaches favored, and exhibited a more “loose-coupled” organization. Simon Institute was more pragmatic, showed a tighter organization with a higher presence of school management, and more independence from the coaches. Both schools were happy with their coaches’ multi-level approach, the frequency (a full day every two weeks) and their experience.

## 4. Additional information: emerging views on change

Teachers responded to an open question of what they would recommend to colleagues in schools that are moving towards a similar development. Teachers of Simon College emphasized the importance of structuring student work, a clear step-by-step development school-wide, guidance by external experts, sharing with all teachers in the school, and finding a partner school as sparring partner. School management at Simon College expressed the need for clear structures and conditions, for finding common ground, for communication with teachers and for individual and personal support for teachers. Teachers at Thomas College emphasized learning by doing (but only after a preparation year), educating teachers in order to be able to “let go” without a loss of quality, to ask for assisted performance by the coaches, to communicate school-wide, and to ensure compensation for extra time. The school management expressed the need for a bottom-up approach, to stimulate change, to accept uncertainty and flaws, and not to impose change on teachers. These descriptions reveal attitudes on change that have elements of distinguished views: blueprint, human relations and learning approach (De Caluwé & Vermaak, 2003).

## Plans for school year 2004/2005

Thomas College will widen the project to the 5<sup>th</sup> year (continuation for the current students) and a new 4<sup>th</sup> year class; to increase teacher involvement, a full staff workshop lead by two colleagues will be held every two weeks; development of longitudinal skills and subjects, and a design of "mastery of subject areas" as an assessment procedure; in the meantime, the school will temporarily reinstitute the grading system for students. Simon Institute will emphasize tutor roles and skills, expanding the project to two 4<sup>th</sup> year classes and two 5<sup>th</sup> year classes, and in the non-college bound track, to two 4<sup>th</sup> year classes.

## Findings of second Study

Goals of this study:

1. current situation of the achievement projects
2. ownership of this innovation

This research was carried out in February of 2005 at Thomas College (response: 17 teachers = 68%; students = 44), in 4<sup>th</sup> grade (secondary school) . At the Simon Institute, the project was carried out (response: 13 teachers = 33%; students = 52) in 5<sup>th</sup> grade (secondary school) in November 2005 (school year 2005/2006).

Below we show some examples (out of a total of 34 items) of the response as given in the questionnaires.

Teachers opinion on achievement tasks; mean score:  
1=bad; 2=average; 3=fair to good; 4=excellent

| Opinion on tasks:   | Simon Institute | Thomas College |
|---|-----------------|----------------|
| - connection with student's real-life experience          | 2.7             | 2.7            |
| - offer students sufficient structure                     | 2.6             | 2.3            |
| - offer students the required variation                   | 3.3             | 2.9            |
| - correct degree of difficulty                            | 2.4             | 2.2            |
| - offer students sufficient opportunity to gain knowledge | 2.8             | 2.3            |
| - connection with subject                                 | 2.9             | 2.4            |
| - interdisciplinary                                       | 3.0             | 2.1            |
| - workability for students                                | 2.6             | 3.1            |
| - workability for teachers                                | 2.6             | 2.3            |

Teachers opinion on support; mean score:  
1=bad; 2=average; 3=fair to good; 4=excellent

| Opinion on:                                 | Simon Institute | Thomas College |
|---|-----------------|----------------|
| - support by coaches                        | 2.7             | 2.6            |
| - support by school                         | 3.1             | 2.8            |
| - understanding of teachers' concerns/fears | 2.5             | 2.4            |
| - taking into account skills of teachers    | 2.7             | 2.4            |
| - own influence on concept                  | 3.0             | 2.5            |
| - information provided                      | 2.5             | 3.0            |
| - fulfilment of preconditions               | 2.5             | 2.1            |

Teachers opinion on students benefits; mean score:  
1=applies to only a few; 2=one quarter; 3=half; 4=sizeable majority

| Student benefits  | Simon Institute | Thomas College |
|---|-----------------|----------------|
| - students direct own learning process                        | 3.6             | 2.8            |
| - students work with more motivation                          | 2.8             | 3.1            |
| - In terms of knowledge, students learn the same amount       | 2.8             | 2.6            |
| - In terms of skills, students learn more                     | 3.3             | 3.6            |
| - students develop changed attitude towards learning          | 2.9             | 3.2            |
| - students are better prepared for continued study/profession | 2.6             | 3.4            |

Teachers opinion on students aptitude

At the Simon Institute and Thomas College, 39% and 47% respectively of the teachers believe the achievement projects are not appropriate for a proportion of the students. The reasons cited are:

- students lack a sufficient degree of independency
- students often need a more structured approach.

However, these same teachers also believe that traditional teaching methods also have a down side, and are not appropriate for a different group of students

## Students' opinions

Students at Thomas College designed the questionnaire with help from the researcher as an "achievement project"; they did the research themselves, asked the researcher to process the data and prepared the presentation.

Method: questionnaire with 17 items.

Administered to : 44 students at Thomas College, 4th grade secondary; and in an adapted version to 52 students, 5<sup>th</sup> grade secondary, at Simon Institute.

Students' opinion on results; mean score:

1=none; 2=little; 3=fair; 4=many

percentage response: 'much' and 'able (at the start of project)'

| What we learned doing tasks          | Simon Institute |            |      | Thomas College |            |      |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|------------|------|----------------|------------|------|
|                                      | mean            | much       | able | mean           | much       | able |
| - to design the task                 | 2.5             | <b>37%</b> | 2%   | 2.8            | <b>59%</b> | 7%   |
| - planning                           | 2.7             | <b>42%</b> | 15%  | 2.7            | <b>51%</b> | 7%   |
| - search information                 | 2.5             | <b>39%</b> | 21%  | 2.8            | <b>46%</b> | 23%  |
| - doing research                     | 2.7             | <b>54%</b> | 8%   | 2.4            | <b>44%</b> | 7%   |
| - making presentation                | 2.6             | <b>49%</b> | 2%   | 2.7            | <b>53%</b> | 9%   |
| - cooperation                        | 3.1             | <b>60%</b> | 19%  | 3.1            | <b>53%</b> | 23%  |
| - problem-solving at work            | 2.5             | <b>45%</b> | 8%   | 2.2            | <b>30%</b> | 2%   |
| - reflection while working           | 2.2             | <b>31%</b> | 8%   | 2.4            | <b>44%</b> | 5%   |
| - another way of learning            | -               | -          | -    | 2.3            | <b>43%</b> | 0%   |
| - being responsible for own learning | 2.7             | <b>40%</b> | 15%  | -              | -          | -    |
| - knowledge of topics                | 2.9             | <b>60%</b> | 2%   | 2.4            | <b>41%</b> | 2%   |

## In summary

Both schools exhibit satisfaction with the quality of the achievement tasks and value the support from the school management and, to a lesser extent, from the coaches. They expected more attention to their uncertainty and the lack of appropriate skills; teachers asked for more assistance. Both schools report an adequate skill level on the part of the teacher to perform the new tasks, although there is uncertainty about the integration of subject knowledge. At the Simon Institute, this was less of a factor; presumably because the projects were led by two teachers of different subjects. Teachers from both schools reported having better contacts with students and being motivated to work in the new style. At Simon College, 6 out of 10 teachers acquired ownership by working with the concept, as did 5 out of 10 teachers working within the project at Thomas College. The students considered the tasks to be of a higher than average level of challenge, interest and variety; students at Thomas College were positive about their key teacher/tutor and a little less positive about the subject teachers, while students at Simon College reported just the opposite. Students from both schools reported having

acquired skills in performing the tasks: planning, designing, doing research, presenting, and cooperating to a fair degree. At the Simon Institute, some 66% of the students are motivated to work in this new way, for the most part alongside traditional lessons. Students at Thomas College were less favorable, mainly because of the time involved and some feelings of uncertainty regarding knowledge.

## **Conclusions**

Both schools have made substantial progress in bringing about the premises of the achievement projects, the “design parameters.” The difference between the schools can be seen in the degree of structuring of the tasks: Thomas College is more open in comparison to the Simon Institute, and it seems as if the latter leads to more independency in carrying out the tasks. More structured tasks lead to better problem-solving and more knowledge. It is essential that students know what part of the required knowledge for final exams will be dealt with in regular classes. Students are confused by the intended “mastery of subject areas” being developed at Thomas College. Students are more motivated when tasks are challenging, teachers show enthusiasm, guidance and feedback are adequate and when they, themselves, can present their findings to outsiders (non-school people). Knowledge seems to be an issue for college-oriented schools and should get more attention by teachers, coaches and parents.

The results of the study described above lead us to four tentative conclusions:

1. A joint development of practitioners and coaches promotes ownership
2. A vision-driven cooperative leadership, preferably independent of external coaches, promotes ownership
3. An active role on the part of all teachers leads to ownership
4. A more pragmatic approach during development brings more ownership than an idealistic one.

## **5. AREA of REFERENCE: Partnership**

The goal of the partnership of schools, coaches and researchers was to contribute to the implementation of a collectively developed concept. It was assumed that frequent communication would enhance interest in other views and as a consequence would improve the concepts of teaching and learning.

We identified three sets of relationships (p.11): school – researcher; school – coaches, and researcher – coaches. Each partner is embedded in an organization of its own. The organization of APS became distinct during this collaboration due to the pivotal role of the think tank coordinator, having relations both with coaches and researcher.

### **First we will discuss the mutual relations**

#### **From the perspective of the researcher:**

In the initial years (until the end of 2003) shared (with all three partners) “start sessions” or “info sessions” took place; researchers were present at planning meetings and talked to coaches, and in 2003 researchers fed back their written findings to coaches and schools. The think tank coordinator intensified contacts with the researchers. Coaches and researchers hardly met at all, much to the chagrin of the researchers, and the school visits of the researchers did not go beyond a regular functional and formal relationship. The relationship ended with the delivery of the research report on 3 schools and a theoretical thorough frame of reference for continuation. The researchers and the think tank coordinator acknowledged how hard it was to benefit from each others’ approaches and ended the relationship.

The think tank coordinator commissioned another researcher to look at the progress on the two schools. The two studies were the result. During the research these two persons kept each other well informed.

The researcher did her 1<sup>st</sup> study before summer break and fed the results back to the schools through reports, and oral communication with the coordinator of Thomas College who was eager to learn from the findings. These phone conversations created an understanding relationship between school coordinator and researcher. The Simon Institute expressed little need for research, so the relationship was official and functional.

The researcher and think tank coordinator (who was recovering from a serious illness) had a feedback session with the coaches’ coordinator on the findings of the 1<sup>st</sup> report; he became motivated/re-motivated by the findings. Some weeks later the researcher and think tank coordinator met with the group of coaches. Coaches said that not much new had been observed, but they did brainstorm on criteria for “ownership,” which was selected as topic for the 2<sup>nd</sup> study.

The study on ownership was carried out early in 2005 at Thomas College because the coordinator and management of the school wanted the findings to contribute to decision-making on the future of the project. The intensified contacts took the shape of mutual learning: the response on the questionnaire was 68%, the open questions were filled out in detail and the researcher assisted students in conducting their research “achievement project”. The coordinator frequently consulted with the researcher by phone about the current dilemmas within the schools. This did not interfere with the regular visits of the assigned coaches.

At the Simon Institute, the study on ownership was postponed; people were too busy wrapping up other business before the summer break. In the fall of 2005, the researcher delivered a draft questionnaire, which was slightly modified by the school management before being administered, and the findings were fed back to the school. The researcher took the initiative to offer comparable findings from other schools, which the school management did not appreciate. These findings were not considered relevant by the school. The relationship ended where it had started: an official relationship, but accepted in name only.

The findings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> study were sent to the coaches of the schools immediately after completion at the end of February. The coaches did not approach the researcher and the think tank coordinator took on the task of approaching the coaches for comment.

To summarize: the researcher and the coordinator at Thomas School entered the stage of interpretation (Dixon, 2002): interpreting data, relating findings to the needs of the school, as did the researcher and the think tank coordinator. The researcher and the coaching coordinator shared information; the researcher and the coaches had an official, functional relationship.

The think tank coordinator took the role as a “go-between” to inform coaches of the findings of the research.

#### **From the perspective of the coaches:**

The coaches established a working relationship with their partners in the schools; they were effective in connecting concept and school practice which evolved into interpretation and action planning (Dixons’ full cycle of collective learning). The coaches had little interest in research; despite being able to acknowledge its value they did not see its benefit for their work with the school.

#### **From the perspective of the school:**

Both schools had a learning relationship with their coaches; both schools accepted the coaching concept but had different responses: Simon Institute showed more independence, while Thomas College was more apt to embrace it. The schools shared views and practice in a joint session after the first year of putting achievement learning into practice as mutual learning. The management of Thomas College developed an “interpretative” relationship with the researcher; the management had an outside source or ‘second opinion’ to reflect on their process.

#### **The intermediate position of the think tank coordinator:**

The organization of APS became more important over the course of the developmental process. In the initial stage, some seven projects were to find partner schools. Only three sites (school and coach) were described in the first study, one of them being Thomas College. The think tank coordination wanted a more prominent role in the selection of the schools and the assignment of coaches, but practice proved strongly that a rocking boat is hard to steer. The think tank coordinator accepted the “professional” relationship with coaches. In January 2004 the think tank coordination team, including the supervising director, started to talk more intensively with the coaches of the various projects, among them the coaches of the achievement project in this

study. These sessions took place every 6 months, and served the purpose of checking plans and progress, sharing information and perspectives, and helping coaches to go move forward through interpretation of views and findings. As a matter of fact the think tank coordinators had no intentions to be engaged in action planning.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> report was sent to the coaches, and the think tank coordinator asked for written comments. Coaches felt the research was not well communicated with them (the coaches) which prevented them from acquiring ownership. However, it was a confirmation of their intuitive knowledge, and in hindsight it refreshes the process so it can serve as an instrument to reflect on these years. Coaches liked the advice from school people, and suggested an alternative for the written report, which feels too “definite” and too extensive.

**In short:** collective learning within the partnership did not occur: Mutual learning between two partners did but it did not “jump” to other sets of partners. It occurred between coaches and school people as an ongoing “call and response” of matching concepts and practice resulting in joint action planning. It occurred between researcher and one school by revising the planning based on data feedback and shared experience in school development. And it occurred between researcher and think tank coordinator based on shared interests to let revolve the data and interpretations. It also took place in a session of the two schools sharing their experiences in this developmental process. It did not occur between researcher and one school. The management of that school was more guarded and strongly aware of its responsibility for parents and community, and saw the role of the coaches mainly as assisting their development. They even expressed some fear that APS would reap the benefits of this co-developed project.

## **Conclusions and exploration**

### **Fresh concepts and teachers' needs**

Although the set of premises can read as an “educational concept,” it was the lack of a coherent whole school concept (not identical to a “blueprint”) that created confusion within the partnership. It did not serve as input for collective learning, although it was considered a fresh approach by the think tank coordinators and seen as a challenge for school development by the coaches. In the initial contacts between schools, coaches and researchers, one glaring deficiency was that the tacit knowledge of the participants was not accessed and utilized, which caused frictions that delayed the process (Allen et al., 2004). When entering the schools, the premises offered by the coaches had a high key status and some school people felt as though compliance in the school practice was mandated. External agents, however, tend to underestimate the routines of the organizations they work with, and this can lead to stumbling blocks in the rapport between school and coaches, which in turn means an unproductive relationship. Frequently, the coaches fall into the “anarchy trap,” taking on tasks that range far and wide from the goals of the project (Davies, 1986). This might be one reason the more structured organization of Simon Institute proved to be a better and more effective place for the coaches to work. They were able to relate to the needs of the teachers, and as a result, produced a school-wide project. The school was very definite on how to handle the emerging issue of grading and knowledge, and this determined the organization of the achievement project. One could argue that the more open approach of Thomas College, which was reflected in their diverging small-scale experiments, presented the anarchy trap to the coaches. For them, it became a mutual quest for the best concept/practice ratio, to the detriment of the teachers' needs and students' confidence in the new learning concept. After a year, the school re-instituted grading at the request of parents and took a fresh look, with guidance by the coaches, at exploring the relationship between knowledge and achievement projects.

### **Fresh concepts, change and partnership**

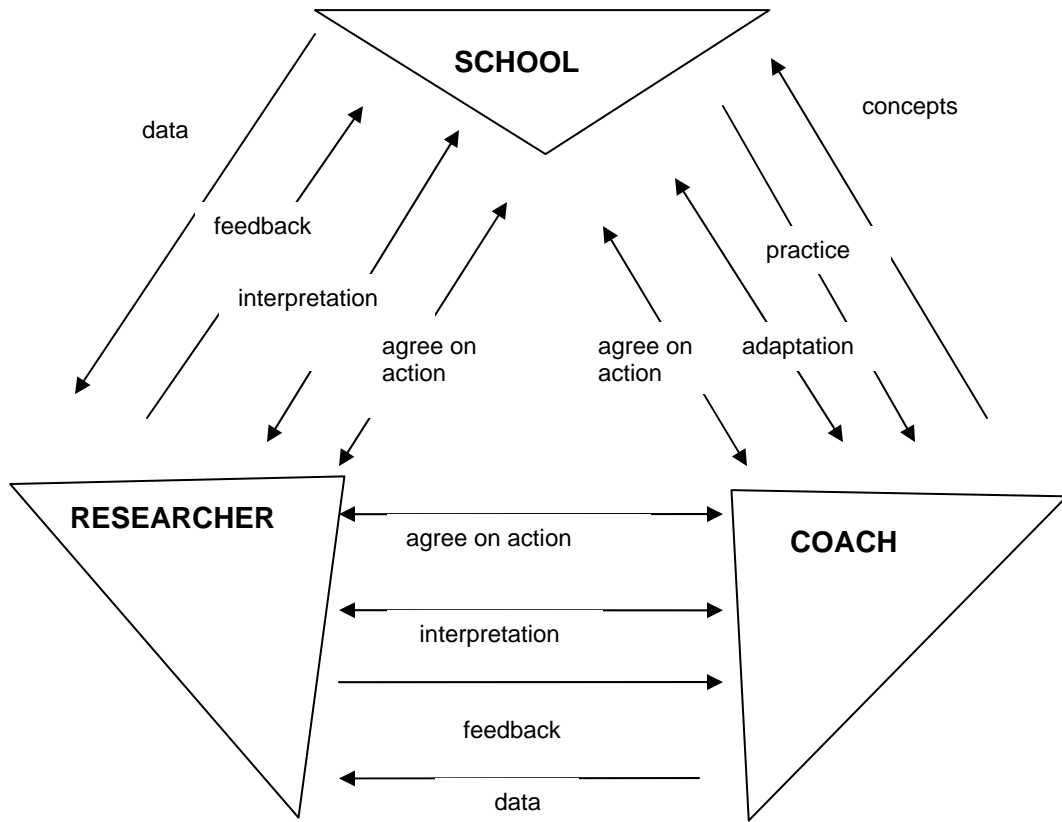
Within a school, considerable differences in perspectives on change can be observed. Values and perceptions can be very different and relatively fixed (Van den Berg et al., 1996), different concerns can cause people to move at different paces (or in some cases not at all) through change processes (Hall & Hord, 1987), perceptions and preferences on change are different and relatively stable (Caluwé & Vermaak, 2001), unrealistic views of the existing situation may dominate (Argyris & Schön, 1978), tensions between leadership and staff can lead to non-productive strategies (Hanson, 1996), and a hidden culture may block change entirely (Morgan, 1994). This imposing list of references is not meant to intimidate the reader, but intended as a means of drawing attention to the organizational side of educational change. The fresh concepts require another view on how to get the job done with the students, and require new ways of getting management and staff to cooperate. It implies ways of looking at schools as organizations, identifying structure and culture in order to make educational change happen (Handy, 1984). Coaches could benefit from approaches developed by organizational consultants to balance fresh or existing concepts, the current state of the organization and the capacity of the school. For an organizational consultant it is an indispensable precondition for starting productive work with a client. In a three-step approach (listen and ask, share and conclude, and agree on action (Block, 1981)), the organization and the consultant define

their “playing field.” This approach is necessary to effectively make inroads in a school, and it can be repeated during consulting/coaching on a small scale (for example with a group of recalcitrant teachers) and in short time cycles. It resembles, when seen as a cyclic process, the collective learning cycle as proposed by Dixon (2002): get information, disseminate information, share interpretation, plan action. Based on the findings of our two studies in which mutual learning occurred between two partners, one can image a situation where mutual learning jumps to another set of partners, resulting in “shared mutual learning.” For example: the learning between researcher and one school could be shared by researcher and coaches which, in turn, could inform and change the coach/school relationship.

We distinguish and construct four layers or steps (note that the nomenclature is different due to the specific mutual relation: the school/coach relationship differs from the researchers’ relationships):

1. collecting data or offering concepts
2. feedback on data or practice
3. interpretation or adaptation
4. agreement on action.

We suggest the following figure for mutual learning, which has potential for collective learning:



**Mutual Learning Triangle**

Constructed after: Dixon, N. (2004), Block, P. (1981)

## **The learning organization**

Mutual learning and collective learning are not the equivalent of the learning organization. It shares the focus on “organizing and organization” as opposed to learning that happens in (and outside) the classroom as the outcome of a production process called “teaching and learning.” A learning organization improves the production, the outcomes and renewal through understanding what happens in the process of getting the job done. It encompasses the role of structures and culture, the motivation and the competences of people into an adaptive system to meet the requirements of the environment or market. It has a great appeal to educationalists and is often taken for granted. Yet there is a serious contradiction as Weick and Westley (1996) have pointed out: learning needs an open and stimulating “space,” while organizations are attuned to efficiency, control and low redundancy. The schools in this study seem to illustrate each side of the “oxymoron”: Thomas College leans toward the learning side, while the Simon Institute leans toward the organizational side. The consequences of this orientation are different: Thomas College is pursuing a practice closer to an ideal concept and encounters resistance from parents, students and non-participating colleagues. In their advice to other schools, the teachers and project coordinator at Thomas College referred to “learning and communication.” The preparation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> study, the findings and the dialogue with the researcher moved them to accept a more structured organization. From the very start, the Simon Institute exhibited a well-structured organization and succeeded in incorporating new learning that had to be assimilated into current teaching and learning. In their advice to other schools, they emphasized the importance of structured tasks for students and adequate working conditions for teachers. The findings on the partnership, e.g. the conclusion that mutual relations between two partners did arise but no further progress beyond that occurred, begs the question of why collective learning did not happen. Most likely, professionalism and the inherent tendency to work autonomously with the client prevent partners from sharing. Within the client-consultant/coach relationship there is little room for observation or interest by outsiders. There is more room for this in hindsight, as coaches revealed in their evaluation of the partnership. Apparently, professional workers are very focused on their work and their performance and they value the privacy on which the relationship is based (Mintzberg, 1979; Little, 1990). Additionally, over time client and professional worker can become partners, as this study shows. It seems fair to assume that the process of ongoing and participatory research helps to inform partners and enables shared decision-making on the essentials of a developmental process that can reconcile the inherent contradictions of the learning organization.

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