Chapter 1
Introduction: Networking in Schools

1.1 Introduction

Traditionally, a network has been defined as a set of actors (individuals or organisations such as schools) connected by a set of ties, which can be of a more or less formal nature (Borgatti & Foster, 2003). The principle of networking and collaboration has become more prevalent and more widely studied in organisations both in the private and public sectors. This move is seen to arise from advances in the understanding of learning and especially the perceived advantages of collaborative learning, and, in the private sector at least, from an increased need for innovation stemming from intensified international competition, that is seen to necessitate flexible networks that can reduce the exposure of firms to risk and uncertainty (Cohen & Levintal, 1990; Borgatti & Foster, 2003). Arguably, this need for increased innovation is also present in the education system, as demands on the system have increased due to a greater political interest in education. This has resulted from both a perceived growth of the importance of education in the globalised knowledge economy which requires highly educated citizens, and a (perceived) diminution of the influence of politics on the economic sphere in the light of heightened global competition and a broad consensus, at least in the developed economies, around a free market approach to economic policy, leaving education as one of few major spheres which politicians see themselves as able to influence. The demands for ever higher levels of achievement, intolerance of failure and, in some countries at least, concern over the remaining inequities that characterise the system mean that schools too are set demanding goals requiring innovation. This is especially challenging for schools serving disadvantaged communities, that are required to show high levels of raw performance, while being able to directly affect at most 25% of the variance in pupil achievement, the remainder being down to pupil-level factors (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Furthermore, while both national policies and school improvement programmes and initiatives can show evidence of impact, they have not been able to close the gap in achievement between high and low SES schools (West et al., 2006).

In part as a result of this, many educational systems have experimented with networking and collaborative approaches to improvement. For example, in the 1990s

over 100 schools were involved with the National Schools Network in Australia. In the US, there are a number of school improvement networks including the League of Professional Schools and the Coalition of Essential Schools. The school improvement network, Improving the Quality of Education for All (IQEA) exists in diverse contexts ranging from Hong Kong to Iceland. However, it would seem it is the English context where the commitment to networking and collaboration has been greatest. During the past decade significant resources have been invested in collaborative arrangements including Education Action Zones (EAZ), Excellence in Cities (EiC), Leadership Incentive Grant (LIG), Schools facing Extremely Challenging Circumstances (SfECC), Network Learning Communities (NLCs), and various Specialist Schools partnership and network programmes. These developments have been aimed at relocating innovation closer to schools in order to generate greater collective capacity for change and have relied on teachers working together across organisational boundaries without any significant structural changes to their organisations.

1.2 The Impact of Networking and Collaboration in Education

Interestingly, in light of the interest of both policy and practice in networking and collaboration in education, more research appears to focus on the conditions under which networks and collaborative arrangements between schools can be effective than on whether they have a positive impact in the first place. Most studies are cross-sectional in nature, though some longitudinal work exists, usually focussing on a 2–3 year period. The overall evidence of the impact of networking and collaboration on school effectiveness and improvement is therefore limited, though there is some evidence from individual programmes, such as the SSAP run by the Specialist Schools Trust which partnered low achieving schools 'lead' schools that supported them and showed positive outcomes for schools in the study (Chapman & Allen, 2005).

OECD (2000) findings suggest creating collaborative structures around schools is more likely to result in deeper organisational learning both collectively and individually. This work shows that school networks are locations in which specialised knowledge can be created and transferred within collaborative contexts. Senge (1990) emphasises collaborative learning and team skills as being the key to successful and sustainable organisational development rather than individual skills and individual learning. His work suggests that networks of schools do not just facilitate innovation but the evidence would suggest that they offer the possibility of new ways of working. It has been shown that they offer the potential for redesigning local systems and structures by promoting different forms of collaboration, linkages, and multi-functional partnerships (Senge et al., 2000). Consequently, school networks are increasingly being seen as a means of facilitating innovation and change as well as contributing to large-scale reform (Chapman & Fullan, 2007; Ainscow & West, 2006; Hargreaves, A., 2003a; OECD, 2000).

In 2005 the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE) published a review of the impact of networking arrangements of various kinds on students, teachers, schools, and their communities. The review locates studies that claim impact on student attainment and engagement, on teachers on schools, and on parents.

With regard to pupil attainment, studies by Montgomery (2001) and Greenberg (1996) are cited as evidence of high impact. Bielefeldt et al. (1999) also offer evidence of increases in student skills and progression. Further, the Montgomery and Bielefeldt studies claim significant impact on levels of student engagement, with supporting evidence from studies by Adler (1995) and Thurlow et al. (1999). Though findings from these studies are robust, it should be understood that these were, for the most part, closely focussed studies, targeted on particular student groups, rather than on whole school communities. Nevertheless, CUREE also reports a number of studies claiming some impact to support these cases (e.g. Reyes & Phillips, 2002; Riley & Jordan, 2004). While the review also finds some studies (e.g. Sanders, 1999) that focussed on the impact of networking on practitioners, ignoring any student effects, and others reporting no impact (e.g. Pinon, Samii-Shore, & Batchelder, 2002), overall, the balance of evidence seems to be that collaborative arrangements *can* impact on students, though not all do.

The review cites 11 studies that have reported changes in teachers knowledge and skills as a result of network 'interventions', the majority of which 'led to clearly identifiable behaviour changes' (CUREE, 2005). Six of these (Bielefeldt et al., 1999; Adler, 1995; Gettinger et al., 1999; Greenberg, 1996; Thurlow, 1999) were considered to offer evidence of high impact judged by such criteria as observable changes in classroom behaviour, changes in attitudes towards parental involvement, improved classroom management and deepened knowledge, and understanding of teaching and learning. Again, there were some less promising studies: Kahne et al. (2001) reported high levels of teacher mistrust, and reluctance to commit to externally determined goals, and Pinon et al. (2002) noted that school principals seemed to be more stirred by collaborative work than were their teachers, but these are comments on the way collaboration has been practised, rather than collaboration per se. In fact, we have made similar observations ourselves in the early phase of collaborative activity, when the 'groundrules' and operating principles have not been adequately clarified. However, this has not necessarily proved a barrier to the development of cohesive collaborative cultures.

The review's comments on school level impact are disappointing. It seems they were unable to locate anything that had any substantial contribution to make to understanding the ways collaborative arrangements influence school structures and processes. But, there are impacts on the school community reported, which themselves imply that something different is going on within schools. The main areas of community development identified are increased involvement of parents in the life of the school and closer links with local communities. Tantalisingly, there is little comment on how such networking arrangements influence either governance arrangements, or relationships with the responsible education authority or district personnel.

Looking close to home, in England, Chapman and Harris (2004), reviewing the impact of *Network Learning Groups* on schools facing challenging circumstances offer a number of propositions. These suggested that successful collaboration hinged on the use of key levers within the network. Levers include a clear focus on teaching and learning, which encourages teachers to focus on and experiment with their own classroom practice; distributed leadership, which draws in the various members of the schools in the network and allocates real tasks to them; a shared commitment to professional development at all levels, including headship, and the capacity to identify and to exploit opportunities for external support. This last point is especially interesting, as it implies that far from joining together in order to establish a common boundary, successful networks remain open to their environments and the opportunities to draw on resources to be found there.

With regard to impact, the authors are measured. They point to important structural and cultural changes that have taken place within schools in the networks. They are able to identify clear advances in school performance in some instances. But they suggest that if the networks are to become a significant improvement strategy for all the schools involved, then they will need also to become rather more rigorous arrangements too. They voice particular reservations about the suitability of current NLGs as improvement vehicles for schools facing challenging circumstances, pointing out that in planning collaborative arrangements for such schools internal capacity (Stoll, 1999), internal structures and practices (Potter, Reynolds, & Chapman, 2002) and particular external factors (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004) would all need to be taken into consideration.

Chapman and Allen (2005), in a report for the *Specialist Schools Trust,* concluded that targeted, collaborative approaches to support the development of a specialised school system were proving highly effective. At its simplest, the partnerships had demonstrated greater increases in student achievement over their lifetime than the national average increase, and also increased or maintained added value scores. At a broader level of analysis, there seemed to have been improvements in school climate, staff morale, staff development opportunities, and an increase in the number of staff contributing to leadership roles. Again, the importance of a clear focus for partnership efforts was underlined, though here successful areas of focus extended beyond the development of teaching and learning. Successful partnerships leant heavily on the skills of the 'case manager'—generally an outsider who brings new skills and a wider perspective to the partnerships. But, 'brokerage' was also important—the capacity to initiate links and access support. Though case managers played an important role here, it was noticeable that others, too, developed brokerage skills. Facilitation was a similar issue. Partnerships need to be facilitated—setting them up is not enough—but there a range of staff who can grow into facilitation roles. The report points out, however, that sustainability remains an issue; it seems likely that partnerships will need to be 'renewed' if they are to be sustained, perhaps through the renegotiation of points of focus. Nevertheless, it could be argued that sustained improvement and sustained partnerships are not the same thing, and so long as the one is maintained, perhaps we should not be concerned if the other turns out to be a series of short-term engagements, rather than a marriage.

One of the key advantages of collaborative networks compared to other forms of school improvement, such as externally led school improvement programmes, is that it allows schools to co-construct improvement around individual school needs, rather than buying into programmes that may not be properly contextualised (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002). Similarly, it can help solve the problem of purely internal improvement programmes that may flounder due to the lack of internal capacity in schools. The fact that networks co-construct their own solutions rather than simply implementing externally developed programmes is advantageous in that it leads to active construction of knowledge, and therefore stronger learning than is possible in a buy-in situation. However, this can also be a slower process than adopting external reforms, and can lead to an element of reinventing existing solutions and susceptibility to educational fads. However, buy-in is unlikely to generate new knowledge in the way that collaborative learning has been found to do in successful instances (Ainscow & West, 2006). There is evidence in a number of studies that this collaborative learning can indeed increase school capacity (Chapman & Allen, 2005), can help forge relationships across previously isolated schools (Harris et al., 2005), and they can therefore be an effective means of sharing good practice (Harris et al., 2005; Datnow et al., 2002). The extent to which this actually happens in existing collaborations is variable, however, some finding that real sharing of practice can be limited (Lindsay, Harris, Chapman, & Muijs, 2005). Ainscow and West (2005) report that collaboration leads to teachers viewing disadvantaged pupils in new ways, and to lesser polarisation between schools. However, we need to be careful to easily assume that learning can occur or that competencies can merely be transferred from one school to another. Competencies are both contextual and embedded, in the sense that they are ultimately located in people and culture. This means that ongoing intervention will be required before sharing is possible, and that a shared language needs to be developed between the partners (Nooteboom, 2004).

As well as these advantages, collaborations can sometimes be entered into for reasons that are not related to improving performance. Ego and empire building on the part of senior managers may be one of the reasons for taking on leadership within a federation, for example, as are the desire for a 'new challenge' on the part of managers. Added prestige by allying to another school seen as more successful or higher status can also be seen as a cause for collaboration (Borgatti & Foster, 2003). External coercion may be another reason for entering into collaboration.

1.3 Structure of This Book

There is therefore some promising evidence of the strength of networking and collaboration, though it is limited in scope. There is also growing evidence of the conditions required for effective networking and collaboration.

One aspect that has not been explored in any depth, however, is the theoretical background to networking and collaboration. Therefore, in Part I of this book we will look at theoretical positions on networking between organisations, with a view to informing both research and practical decision making. In Chapter 2 we will

discuss networking and collaboration as a public policy framework, looking at the reasons why collaboration and networking have become increasingly popular public service delivery mechanisms, and what research on non-educational parts of the public sector can teach us. In Chapter 3 we will discuss localised theories of networking and collaboration, in particular constructivist organisational theory, social capital theory, and social network theory. In Chapter 4 we will look at societal theories of networking and collaboration, like the theory of New Social Movements, Durkheimian notions of networking, and anomie and functionalist organisational theories. In Chapter 5 we will develop a typology of social networks.

In Part II we will take a more practical look at research on existing networks and collaborative arrangements, and will present a range of research studies of collaboratives and networks. In Chapters 6 and 7 we will discuss federations of schools, a form of networking that has been officially sanctioned and become popular in England over recent years. In Chapter 6 we will focus on qualitative evidence on governance, management, and school improvement, and in Chapter 7 on quantitative evidence of impact on performance. In Chapter 8 we will look at a longitudinal study of collaboration at school district or local authority level, while in Chapter 9 we focus on collaboration in rural areas. Finally, in Chapter 10 of this part, we will look at collaboration between schools and external agencies in so-called multiagency contexts.

In Part III we will look in more depth at what conditions and processes may help us to develop successful collaborative networks. In Chapter 11 we will draw some general conclusions from a decade of research on networking and collaboration conducted by the authors. In Chapter 12 we will look at internal conditions for effective collaboration. In Chapter 13 we will look at external conditions and constraints, while in Chapter 14 we will discuss leadership issues in networks.