

Chapter 11

Reflections on Networking and Collaboration

11.1 Challenges and Possibilities

The UK government, along with other Western governments, has argued that the raising of standards must also promote equity: that the emphasis on raising attainment must not simply benefit children who are already performing at a high level. Implemented properly, and supported by the various inclusion initiatives, the standards agenda is, it is argued, of even greater potential benefit to previously low-attaining children in poorly performing schools: it is about excellence for the many, not just the few.

Yet the national strategies to raise standards and other accountability measures such as the ‘No Child Left Behind’ legislation in the US, whatever their benefits, have tended to reduce the flexibility with which schools can respond to the diverse characteristics of their students. Our research demonstrates that this is a particular problem for schools that are formally categorised as performing poorly, since the short-term pressure to deliver satisfactory ‘metrics’ that this demands, can postpone the development of strategies necessary for longer-term improvement. And, as is evident from studies of schools that had made sustained progress, despite the drag-anchor of being identified as ‘below floor targets’ (West, Ainscow, & Stanford, 2005), head teachers are acutely aware of such pressures.

Whilst the need to escape such designations can be useful in galvanising early efforts, since the designation itself becomes a common enemy upon which energies can be focussed, it may also limit and inhibit ambition—amongst students and teachers alike.

Nevertheless, our analysis of the experiences also offers some reasons for optimism, not least in that it suggests that the system has considerable untapped potential to improve itself. There are, we have noted, skills, knowledge and, most importantly, creativity within schools, and within their local communities, that can be mobilised to improve educational provision. We have seen, for example, how school staff groups can come together to strengthen and increase the impact of one another’s efforts; we have seen the impact when head teachers pool their knowledge and experience for the benefit of a particular school, or for a group of schools; we have seen the potential for cooperation between schools and their local authority,

and with the wider community; and, running through all our work, we have seen the potential of partnerships between school staff and researchers.

All of this demonstrates what can be achieved when those who have a stake in urban education engage in authentic collaborative activity. Of course, collaboration has itself been a regular feature of national policy in recent years, best illustrated by Excellence in Cities and the Leadership Incentive Grant, both initiatives specifically targeted on schools in challenging urban environments. Nevertheless, and despite this press for greater collaboration within and between schools, there has been a tendency to view urban schools through a deficit lens, focussing on what they lack rather than the resources that they can draw on. As a result, it has often been assumed that externally driven strategies are the only feasible means of achieving improvement. Whilst recent work leaves us in no doubt about the importance of additional resources as a stimulus to school to school collaboration (Ainscow et al., 2006), we are also aware of the potency of local ownership and local ideas. Indeed, our experiences suggest that national improvement strategies have, too often, fallen into the trap of overlooking the evidence that local interpretation and adaptation can shape and strengthen the way proposals are implemented. It seems to us that this helps to explain why these initiatives have had rather mixed effects.

Of course, the pressures arising from inspection and from the publishing of inspection reports and test and examination results have certainly focussed minds. In some instances, this has also inspired a degree of rethinking and experimentation. However, it has sometimes encouraged staff to take a rather insular approach—after all, what one school ‘contributes’ to the success of another does not appear in any league table. At the same time, the political imperative to achieve rapid results, particularly the desire to identify strategies that ‘work’ and then to ‘up-scale’ these through centrally determined prescriptions, has created barriers to progress. Further, the tendency to designate some schools as failing, or causing concern, can place restrictions on the willingness of those involved to take risks.

However, we remain optimistic that schools can find ways to work together and with their communities that will enable some of the disadvantages of location and catchment to be overcome. The remainder of this paper develops this argument, giving examples of collaboration between schools, and the impact of such collaboration. It sets out our understanding of what collaboration means, and our speculations about the factors that encourage schools to enter into sustained collaborative arrangements with one another. Finally, it concludes with what we feel is needed if collaboration is to become an important ingredient in the school improvement process.

Our findings reported here are based on a detailed analysis of case studies of collaborative practice in urban authorities in different parts of the country. Both process and outcome data were analysed and compared in identifying the sample, which represents instances where collaboration seems to have had significant, positive impact on student experiences and outcomes, as measured by current metrics for school performance and as judged by Ofsted inspection teams. As far as possible, findings and interpretations were validated with appropriate stakeholder groups.

11.2 Impact of Collaboration

Of course, the impact of collaboration has varied considerably from place to place. While in some instances, it has led to interesting explorations of the possibilities of schools working together, many of these initiatives remain fragile. Indeed, there are instances where the resources provided to underpin collaborative working have simply been hived off to serve the purposes of individual schools. There are, however, some contexts in which school-to-school collaboration seems to have had a significant impact on both practice and on learning outcomes. These examples confirm that such arrangements do have an enormous potential for fostering system-wide improvement, particularly in urban contexts. More specifically, they begin to show how collaboration between schools can provide an effective means of solving immediate problems, such as staff shortages; how they can have a positive impact in periods of crisis, such as during the closure of a school; and, how, in the longer run, schools working together can contribute to the raising of aspirations and attainment in schools that have had a record of low achievement. There is also evidence that collaboration can help to reduce the polarisation within the education system, to the particular benefit of those students who are on the edges of the system and performing relatively poorly. The approaches to collaboration we have documented in this book vary considerably in style, and in terms of their impact on practice and learning outcomes. The impact may be direct or indirect, short term or longer term. We enlarge on this below.

11.3 Direct Impact Activities

We note that activities that have a direct and immediate impact on achievement tend to be *relatively* easy to implement, as we illustrate in the following brief examples from the work of various collaboratives:

- One collaborative has prepared a detailed analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of all the subject departments in all schools. This means that interventions can draw on the best practice available to focus on areas of need. So, for example, in one school there is a problem in the Science department, and an Advanced Skills Science Teacher from another school in the group is seconded to the school 1 day each week to support development.
- Several of the schools in another collaborative were experiencing difficulties with English teaching. Since they all had rather inexperienced heads of department, the collaborative decided to appoint an experienced teacher to act as consultant. The contributions of the consultant varied from school to school, depending on need and circumstances. In some cases she supported heads of department in developing their leadership practices, in others she worked with teaching staff in developing schemes of work and resources and on some occasions, she coached teachers with regard to their classroom practices.
- Some schools, particularly those that have a relatively poor reputation, have found it difficult to attract suitably qualified teachers for some areas of the

curriculum. On the other hand, schools that are seen as being more successful tend to face far fewer difficulties, even within the same geographical area. The worry is that these inequities act in ways that further widen the quality of experience between high-achieving and low-achieving schools. Music, not a mainstream subject, but one that many students enjoy, offers a good example of this phenomenon. At one point, three schools in a network of schools were unable to offer music lessons at all, simply because they could attract no qualified staff. At the same time, students in another school in the locality had access during a typical week to 14 music teachers, both school-based and peripatetic. The collaborative identified music as an area for joint development, and set up a system that spread the teaching of music specialists between schools. As well as providing additional funding to attract new staff and encourage much wider participation in music across the schools, the network was able to offer teaching jobs that involved work in a number of schools, making them much more attractive to potential recruits.

11.4 Strengthening Capacity

Some strategies involve processes that are intended to increase the capacity of schools and of their staffs to offer a stronger curriculum and more effective teaching arrangements. This notion of capacity-building (Hopkins et al., 1994) is an important one, if schools could simply increase their impact on students by changing policies, it might be expected that they would have already done so. Unfortunately, when schools have not done so, it is usually because the school community does not have the capacity to implement changes necessary to underpin improvements.

By their nature, such changes take longer to implement, as illustrated in the following examples:

- Two capacity-building activities are gradually deepening the collaboration between the eight schools in one network, whilst addressing specific areas of work that require further development. First of all, a series of ‘self-help groups’ have been created that bring together key staff who are responsible for similar tasks in their schools. Each of these groups is coordinated by an individual from a different school in the network. Current areas of focus for such groups include: curriculum development, timetable planning, inclusion, pastoral care, and post-16 arrangements. Plans are being developed so that all the schools will coordinate the post-16 timetable. This will mean that staff and students can move between schools in order to maximise choices and strengthen pedagogy across the collaborative.
- One collaborative has developed a staff development strategy that involves representatives from each of the schools, working together to strengthen particular areas of practice. So, for example, heads of department took part in a 2-day workshop provided by a team from another Local Education Authority (LEA), and

there are follow-up arrangements to support them in implementing action plans with their own staff teams. The agenda for the workshop, including the use of evidence and the monitoring of teaching and learning, was customised to address needs that had been determined by key insiders within the various schools. One recently appointed departmental head explained that it had focussed on exactly the issues facing her department. She particularly valued the opportunity to learn alongside more experienced colleagues from other schools in the group.

- Gradually, the idea of sharing teaching resources in one network has developed in a way that seems to be valuable in relation to the appointment and retention of staff. Indeed, one of the heads argues that for collaboration to work, 'shared staffing is essential'. So far, a range of approaches have been explored. For example, a joint advertisement was very successful in attracting teachers to the collaborative who may not have applied to those individual schools with relatively poor levels of performance. Meanwhile, the need to appoint part-time posts has on some occasions been avoided, by combining posts across schools posts. A joint staffing plan was put in place, which covers joint training arrangements for post holders, such as those who take on the role of second-in-department. Finally, trainee teachers move between the partner schools during their placements, and there is an intention to become a joint training school.
- Shared inset events within the network provide opportunities to meet teachers from other schools. These are valued by many teachers. As one teacher commented, *This was better than school INSET, because it's good to get out of the comfort zone, the limited way of seeing things in your own school.* Younger teachers, in particular, echoed this sentiment, noting that they had never experienced events where staff were so explicitly (and in many cases literally) putting things on the table for others to borrow and make use of.

11.5 Responding to Crises

In some instances, individual schools have faced crisis points. Collective responses have been seen as valuable in helping to resolve very difficult situations arising within a single school. For example:

- A striking example of the value of one network was seen in its contribution to one of the member schools, which had been placed in 'special measures' following inspection. One of the most straightforward aspects of this was financial, in that the school was not required to contribute into the collective 'kitty', thus making available additional resources to tackle immediate priorities. When it came down to direct practical assistance, it was noticeable that the issues to do with teaching and learning that were at the centre of the 'special measures' agenda, were adopted as development priorities across all of the schools. This meant that teachers from across the schools were to work alongside colleagues in the struggling school, helping it to improve practice and to emerge from its temporary period of crisis.

- The final cohort of students left at a school that is closing tend to suffer, as key staff seek other posts, leaving increasingly negative atmosphere amongst those students and staff who are left behind. One collaborative made a major contribution in helping one school to avoid such a situation. They did this by working together on joint projects, sharing resources, and requiring staff newly appointed to other schools in the collaborative to work in the school during the first year of their contracts, bringing a renewed sense of life and vigour. In the summer of 2004, 150 Year 11 students in a school about to close down attained what were the best GCSE results at the school for years.

11.6 Sustaining Improvements

The examples we have presented so far illustrate activities whose impacts tend to be relatively rapid, but are often temporary in nature. However, we also have evidence suggesting that certain types of developments are proving to be promising in relation to more sustainable improvements. Inevitably, these activities are more complex and involve processes which take longer to evolve, not least because they most often require the negotiation of common priorities and shared values. They also require an investment of human resources, in order to create a framework for management and coordination, as we see in the following examples:

- In one network, the school that has Leading Edge status tends to take the lead in the majority of the improvement efforts. One of the deputies from that school acts as overall improvement coordinator, and is seconded from her duties for 2 days a week to fulfil this role. The head of that particular school talked with pride about what had been achieved so far across the network, whilst also commenting on the impact of these efforts on staff within her own school. So, for example, she explained about the impact on one of her ASTs of supporting developments elsewhere: *She has gained personally and professionally. In fact, it has been fantastic training for her. It has given her a new perspective.* The head went on to say that this teacher was likely to be promoted to a post of head of department in the near future as a result of the developments in her thinking and practice.
- The group of three schools which currently make up one network are increasingly working towards becoming a single federation, sharing responsibility for progress in all of the partner schools and pooling resources for teaching, for building maintenance, and various educational projects. The close working relationships have emerged from the recognition of the mutual benefits of sharing. All schools feel that they have gained from the collaborative working arrangements that have been set up, and are seeking ways to secure these arrangements in the longer term through changes in governance.
- Another network now has in post a consultant head teacher, jointly funded, who works 2 days each week to support developments across the member schools. It is clearly a great advantage that this person is a highly regarded, practising head

from a nearby LEA. A number of other ‘outsiders’, including two officers from the LEA and a consultant from the Leadership development Unit at the University of Manchester, add further resources to the developments that are taking place. Perhaps the key to this is that all of these contributions are seen as being part of a single improvement strategy.

11.7 Sharing in Leadership

In terms of moving the idea of school-to-school collaboration forward, the issue of shared leadership is, we believe, a central driver. This requires leadership practices that involve many stakeholders in sharing responsibility for improving the outcomes for all learners in all of the schools within a collaborative. Often this necessitates significant changes in beliefs and attitudes, and new relationships, as well as improvements in practice. For example:

- Responsibility for the management of one network is shared by the eight head teachers, who meet each month. There is also a programme of ‘learning walks’, where heads visit each other to help in reviewing existing practices. It is anticipated that as relationships deepen and trust grows, these peer review visits will take on a more challenging style. An interesting test of the depth of commitment that already exists occurred as a result of a recent fire that destroyed part of the building in one of the schools. Immediately, other schools offered help, including accommodation and replacement schemes of work. One teacher commented: *12 months ago that would not have happened.*

11.8 Roles and Responsibilities

It seems, therefore, that the perspective and skills of head teachers are central to an understanding of what needs to happen in order that the potential power of collaboration can be mobilised. Their visions for their schools, their beliefs about how they can foster the learning of all of their students, and their commitment to the power of inter-dependent learning, appear to be key influences. All of this means, of course, that replication of these processes in other schools will be difficult, particularly if those in charge are unwilling or unable to make fundamental changes in working patterns. This being the case, there is a very strong case for providing head teachers with professional development opportunities that will support them in taking this work forward.

The emphasis on school level leadership has very significant implications for the roles of LEA staff, too. It means that they have to adjust their priorities and ways of working in response to collaborative arrangements that are led from within schools. Sometimes this leads to misunderstandings and tensions. For example:

- The development of one network as a relatively autonomous structure raised interesting questions about the role of LEA staff. The head teachers were clearly

enthusiastic about the practice of collaboration as it had developed during the first year. However, they were also increasingly aware of the need to define their own agenda. Up until September 2003, it was evident that LEA officers took responsibility for setting the agenda, and for running the collaborative's meetings. As the group became a more solid structure, LEA staff began to consider which other developments and initiatives should be linked to it, and at one point they issued an agenda for a meeting that outlined these. This seemed to raise alarm bells with some head teachers, and phone calls amongst them proliferated as they checked on one another's reactions. The next day, they informed the LEA representative that it would be the collaborative that would draw up the meeting agenda, that the meeting would be chaired by one of the head teachers, and that the LEA representative would be seen as a participant and a partner. In making this stand, the head teachers felt themselves to be exercising a powerful choice about their own future. At the same time, some LEA colleagues recognised this development as being in line with the strengthening and maturing of the collaborative.

There is then, ample evidence within these cases that collaboration between schools has contributed significantly to the ways these schools go about their business. And, remembering that these examples were chosen because they featured groups of schools where student performance has improved more rapidly than is general for schools in difficult urban contexts, it requires no great leap of imagination to posit that collaboration has accordingly contributed to the improvement in student outcomes. But there is no simple equation linking these. Indeed, it is a complex relationship, that involves a range of factors, and the commitment to raise expectations, of teachers and students alike, and the capacity to engage with and manage change are important components.

11.9 Raising Expectations

There is evidence that when schools seek to develop more collaborative ways of working, this can have an impact on how teachers perceive themselves and their work. Specifically, comparisons of practice can lead teachers to view underachieving students in a new light. Rather than simply presenting problems that are assumed to be insurmountable, such students may be perceived as providing feedback on existing classroom arrangements. In this way they may be seen as sources of understanding as to how these arrangements might be developed in ways that could be of benefit to all members of the class.

However, research suggests that developments in practice, particularly amongst more experienced teachers, are unlikely to occur without some exposure to what teaching actually looks like when it is being done differently, and exposure to someone who can help teachers understand the difference between what they are doing and what they aspire to do. It also seems that this sort of problem has to be solved at the individual level before it can be solved at the organisational level. Indeed, there is evidence that increasing collaboration can sometimes result in teachers coming

together to reinforce existing practices rather than confronting the difficulties they face in different ways. This is why leadership is such a key factor in ensuring that collaboration involves both support and challenge.

11.10 Managing Change

By and large the evidence is that schools find it difficult to cope with change, particularly where this involves modifications in thinking and practice. In recent years English schools have had to respond to a multitude of new policies aimed at raising standards. A close scrutiny of what has happened where collaboration has led to school improvement suggests that this has been given additional impetus by external pressure. And, like other social organisations undergoing significant transformation, in schools that are under pressure to change the search is on for what Michael Fullan describes as ‘order and correctness’. Teachers seeking ‘correctness’ will often experience ambiguity and confusion in times of change. Equally, it is difficult to establish order when faced with ambiguous situations.

It seems, then, that those who can help to create a sense of common purpose in such contexts can bring about change. This may, in part at least, throw some light on what has occurred in the contexts we have described. Unusual and challenging factors, emanating as they do from both outside and inside schools, have created a sense of ambiguity. Changing demands, again from both outside and inside the school precipitate disorder. The collaborative arrangements introduced by some groups of head teachers have helped to resolve these problems, and, in so doing, they are also drawing different school staffs together behind broadly similar principles.

Research suggests that ambiguity in organisations increases the extent to which action is guided by values and ideology. Consequently, the values of ‘powerful people’ (i.e. those who can reduce ambiguity) affect what the organisation is and what it can become. Thus, those who resolve ambiguity for themselves and others can implant a new set of values in an organisation, which creates a new set of relevancies and competencies, and, in so doing, introduces a source of innovation. In this way ambiguity sets the scene for organisations to learn about themselves and their environments, allowing them to emerge from their struggles with uncertainty as reinvigorated and more purposeful communities.

11.11 Understanding What Helps Collaboration to Develop

Our own understanding of the potential of collaborative working practices has been influenced by the ideas of Wenger (1998), Senge (1990), and Hargreaves, D., (2003b). Wenger, in putting forward his notion of ‘communities of practice’, describes the transfer and creation of knowledge within the workplace. Essentially, the members of a work community pass on their knowledge and ideas to one another through processes of ‘negotiation’ in which common meanings are established.

'New' knowledge acquired in this way can then be tested out in practice—though inevitably it will be modified as it is subjected to new experiences and contexts. In this way, as ideas are moved around within the community, passing from practitioner to practitioner, they are continually modified and refined. In this way, it becomes possible for knowledge to be re-cycled around the community and returned to the originator—though transformed through the process. Thus, the virtuous circle is completed, with knowledge and understanding increased through each iteration.

Senge, in his writings on learning organisations, suggests that knowledge within organisations takes two forms—the explicit and the tacit. Explicit knowledge (which will embrace established wisdom), is relatively easy to transfer, but is likely to be generalised rather than specific. On the other hand, tacit knowledge is caught rather than deliberately passed on, but can only be caught if the right circumstances exist. Consequently, what can be achieved through explicit and tacit exchanges is limited—learning organisations need to find ways to generate tacit-to-explicit and explicit-to-tacit transfers. Again, our conception of collaborative practice is that it provides just such an opportunity, as individuals work together on common goals, sharing and using one another's knowledge and, through the processes of sharing, reflection and re-cycling, creating new knowledge.

David Hargreaves (2003b) also notes the tacit nature of much of teachers' knowledge, when explaining why it has proved so difficult to transfer good practice from one teacher to another. This leads him to conclude that what he describes as 'social capital' is needed within the teaching communities. Social capital here represents shared values and assumptions that, because they are commonly 'owned' by community members, are available for all members of the community to draw on when transferring knowledge and understandings. For him, building social capital involves the development of networks based on mutual trust, within which good practice can spread in natural ways.

Bearing these ideas in mind, we suggest that collaboration within and between schools is a practice that can both transfer existing knowledge and, more importantly, generate context specific 'new' knowledge. Further, our own research gives strong indications of how such processes can be initiated and managed. At the same time, these experiences also point to certain conditions that are necessary in order to make collaboration effective, which we will discuss further in the following two chapters

11.12 From Collaboration to Collegiality

The research summarised in this paper has led us to formulate a typology of the sorts of relationships that can exist within a network of schools. This points to the need for moves towards deeper, more sustainable arrangements, and suggests the steps involved, as follows:

Association – This is the traditional pattern, where there are some links between schools through occasional LEA meetings and in-service events. By and large, however, this does not involve sharing of knowledge or resources.

Cooperation – This is where closer links develop through participation in meetings and activities that provide opportunities to contribute experiences. As a result there may be some incidental sharing of knowledge and resources.

Collaboration – This involves schools in working together to address particular problems or challenges. By its nature such activities requires the sharing of knowledge and resources.

Collegiality – This involves a longer-term relationship between schools that includes the sharing of responsibility in an inter-dependent way. It leads to the bringing together of knowledge and resources within an agreed set of values.

Bearing this typology in mind, the aim must be to foster moves towards more powerful inter-dependent relationships that can strengthen the capacity of all schools to deliver *a decent all-round education for all pupils*. In this regard, the distinction made by Fielding (1999) between ‘collaboration’ and ‘collegiality’ is particularly helpful. He characterises ‘collaboration’ as being driven by a set of common concerns, narrowly functional, and focussed strongly on intended gains. In such contexts, the partners in a collaborative activity are regarded as a resource, or a source of information. Fielding goes on to suggest that collaboration is, therefore, a plural form of individualism in which participants are typically intolerant of time spent on anything other than the task in hand. He argues that once the driving force behind collaboration is weakened, the task has been completed or priorities have changed, such collaborative working arrangements may dissipate, disappear, or become more tenuous. ‘Collegiality’, on the other hand, is characterised as being much more robust. It is rooted in shared ideals and aspirations, and pursues mutually valued social ends. Collegiality is, therefore, by definition, less reliant upon narrowly defined and predictable ‘gains’.

We have found that, in practice, instances of schools working together usually do not fall neatly into either collaborative or collegial activity. Indeed, it may be that collaboration has to be a forerunner to collegiality. In other words, stakeholders may experience the practical benefits of collaborating when the outcomes are clearly defined, whilst seeking to develop a common language and shared aspirations that might, in the longer term, provide a basis for collegiality.

Amongst secondary schools themselves more now needs to be done to strengthen the strategy of collaboration such that it takes on a greater sense of collegiality. Our view is that this will be achieved by encouraging head teachers to take on collective responsibility for the operation. More specifically, the aim must be to develop more collegial relationships, based on a common commitment to improvement across schools, and to principles of equity and social justice. Provided heads genuinely feel that they are in control of the agenda that are so defined, we would be optimistic that

this could be achieved. In our discussions with heads, we found none that did not believe in the idea of collaborating with other schools.

11.13 Conclusion

As we have explained, the successful use of collaboration is far from straightforward within the English context, where competition and choice continue to be the major driving forces of national education policy. This is why powerful levers are needed that will challenge existing assumptions and, at the same time, move thinking and practice forward. There appears to be a growing body of evidence, from the United States as well as the UK, indicating that collaboration between schools can deliver a number of benefits for students, for teachers, for schools. Our own research points to certain conditions that are necessary in order to make such school-to-school collaborations effective. In summary, these involved appropriate incentives, shared responsibility for success, leaders who understand how to collaborate, common priorities for improvement, informed external support, and an overriding belief that schools working together for the benefit of all of their students is preferable to competing in order to benefit the few in any particular school.

In our view, the absence of such conditions will mean that attempts to encourage schools to work together are likely to result to time-consuming talk, which sooner or later will be dropped. These conclusions are in themselves important for subsequent national initiatives that invest resources in the idea of schools working in partnership.