

## Chapter 15

### Some Final Thoughts

As Hopkins and Reynolds (2001) have stated, school improvement as a field has gone through four main phases. The first phase is described as being characterised by unsystematic attempts at improvement and an emphasis on organisational change and school self-evaluation. Fragmented and weak implementation and a lack of connection to student outcomes were seen as problems with this approach. The second phase was characterised by a rapprochement between school improvement and school effectiveness. School effectiveness contributed its knowledge base and value-added methodologies, while school improvement had developed stronger implementation strategies. Hopkins and Reynolds then posit a third phase, which emphasises student outcomes, classroom processes, and capacity building, as well as sophisticated professional development approaches. Though successes can clearly be identified, the extent to which third phase approaches have led to systemic improvement is debatable, leading to a search for ‘fourth phase’ approaches. One thing that is clear in the description of the first three phases is that they are generally predicated on individual schools working with school improvers, buying-into school improvement programmes, or at most collectively participating in a programme. What is not strongly articulated in these three phases is the idea of school-to-school collaboration as a key motor for school improvement. This is not due to a lack of activity in this area, as in recent years there has been a strong impetus towards collaboration between schools as a road to improvement, and as this book has shown, there are some compelling examples of success. Is it therefore possible that practice has already moved to a fourth phase of school improvement based on collaboration, while academic writing and research has yet to catch up?

Whether this is the case is, at present, still debatable, as we do not as yet have enough quantitative evidence on impact, and there are distinct national differences with regard to the extent to which networking and collaboration between schools has become a central paradigm and practice in school improvement and educational reform.

What is clear, however, is that there is an overall increase in interest in collaboration and networking as a possible school improvement strategy, and one that has been officially encouraged in many areas, not least England. It is therefore certainly timely to draw together theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence as we have attempted to do in this book.

Theoretical perspectives are of particular importance in this area which, certainly in education, has often remained under-theorised. Therefore, Part I of this book focussed specifically on theoretical perspectives of networking and collaboration, highlighting some of the implications for practice of these theoretical orientations. This part of the book is also an invitation to researchers, practitioners, and policy makers to think more clearly about the goals of collaboration and what these may mean for the way networks are set up and managed.

In Part II, a number of empirical studies were introduced on different types of networking and collaboration. Overall, not only do these examples provide clear evidence of the potential of collaboration for organisational improvement, but they also make clear that this is by no means a given. Each chapter in this part points to caveats and examples where collaboration has been less successful as well as to the successes. That is why in Part III we have tried to bring together some of the evidence we have on what internal, external, and leadership factors can enhance network effectiveness.

In their different ways, all of this book presents evidence of the potential of networking and collaboration as a way of improving schools, not just in terms of standards but in terms of equity as well. However, we would also suggest that networking is by no means a panacea for school improvement. Clarity on goals and changes in culture and attitudes, structures, and incentives are required for collaborative strategies to work. Is networking then the fourth phase in school improvement? That is probably an overstatement of the case in a world in which a variety of approaches from school vouchers to extended schools co-exist and compete as new school improvement models; but in our opinion networking is certainly one of the more promising developments in education today, and one that deserves support from policy makers and school improvers, alongside other promising approaches such as strategies to tackle within-school variation (Reynolds, 2007) and approaches that are focussed on effective pedagogical strategies such as peer learning and small group work (Chapman et al., 2009), and should be considered as part of a menu of school improvement strategies.

We hope this book has proved thought-provoking and enlightening.