Chapter 2
Networking and Collaboration as a Public Policy Framework

As we mentioned in Chapter 1, networking and collaboration have become increasingly popular mechanisms for the delivery of public policy over the past two decades. In this chapter we will explore some of the backgrounds to this evolution.

2.1 The Development of Networks as Policy Delivery Mechanisms

In this chapter we will therefore present an overview of international policy initiatives aimed at promoting collaboration in education. We will then frame these within broader public sector policy, drawing on models positing networking as the new framework of public policy more generally. We will discuss the background to these changes in public policy, implications thereof, and the role of education policy in this.

Over recent years management of the public sector has become increasingly devolved from central government in many countries. In countries like the US and the UK, the central government is less inclined than in the past to directly run public services, preferring to devolve services to lower levels of government, and, more often, to develop partnerships and collaborations with private and public sector organisations, in many cases charities. Government has increasingly become a commissioner of services, and a partner in delivery networks rather than a deliverer itself (Milward & Provan, 2003).

The increase in multiagency and multi-partner work is in part the result of a view that sees these as being able to result in greater use of common local resources, and the ability to take collective action. This is most likely to be successful where transaction costs (the cost of setting up and maintaining the network) are low and the benefits to individuals and organisations involved are high, and where resources are scarce, as is frequently the case in the public sector (Berry et al., 2004). A perceived increase in the complexity of problems government has to deal with is likewise seen as contributing to this trend. Increasingly, government managers are no longer primarily in charge of managing large bureaucracies in a hierarchical manner, but are instead managing resources and relationships between providers of the resources needed to fulfill particular policy goals (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004). The perceived

benefits of networking in the public sector are multiple, and include, according to Lawson (2004) effectiveness gains, efficiency gains, resource gains (such as savings and increases in resourcing), capacity gains, and legitimacy gain.

Therefore, networks have become increasingly common in public sector management. McGuire and Agranoff (2007, p. 1) define such networks as *A public management network includes agencies involved in a public policy making and/or administrative structure through which public goods and services may be planned, designed, produced, and delivered.*

The growth of networks is taking two main forms in public policy. The first is the increased use of private sector partners in the delivery of services. Such networks have become widespread as policy delivery has increasingly been devolved to various quasi-governmental agencies, who, in turn, work with local networks to fill in capacity gaps in their own organisations. This is seen by many commentators as essential in light of the growing complexity of the issues that government and its agencies need to address, and of the increasing demands being made by the public with regard to the quality and choice of public services offered to them (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004), a factor that is certainly obvious in the increased emphasis on educational and school quality in popular discourse and the press in many countries. The private sector is seen as more efficient and effective, and more responsive to consumer demand than traditional bureaucratic public sector organisations.

The second key form of networking is more internally focussed, and involves greater joined-up governance between public sector bodies. Again, this evolution has occurred mainly as a result of the perceived complexity of the issues facing the public sector, in some cases hastened by cases of neglect occurring due to a lack of coordination between different public agencies, such as in the highly publicised 'Baby P' child neglect case in the UK. In the UK in particular, 'joined-up government' has been a theme of recent administrations that have attempted to stop unnecessary overlap and people falling between the cracks created by varying responsibilities of different agencies. An example of this that has had a profound influence on education is the creation of Children's Services at the local government level, that have replaced the old Local Education Authorities with integrated authorities responsible not just for education but also for all social and health services for children across a local authority or district. This was mirrored at the national level in the creation of the Department for Children, Schools and Families to replace the Department for Education and Science that was previously responsible for schools and education policy. Of course, it remains unclear to what extent these efforts can be seen as genuine networks rather than just larger and more centralised bureaucracies, and the future of these structures is uncertain at the time of writing as a new coalition government takes charge in a climate in which budget cuts are essential to safeguard the economic future and health of the country.

These developments are seen to have been aided by the development of digital technology, which, as well as allowing for ever greater volumes of information to be collected and stored, also allows for easier communication and sharing of

information between agencies and organisations, be it in the form of electronic communication or in the form of shared or jointly accessible databases (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004). The creation of large electronic databases is therefore another characteristic feature of recent changes in governance. The National Pupil Database in England, for example, collects pupil achievement on statutory tests as well as background data such as ethnicity and eligibility for Free School Meals. As each pupil gets a Unique Pupil Number, they can be tracked over time, with the possibility of additional data being added.

2.2 Types of Public Policy Networks

Two main motivations appear to underlie the formation of networks in the public sector. In one set of cases, a charismatic leader of one of the organisations involved, or an external political actor, will take action to set up the network in light of perceived advantages of networks, deficiencies in current organisational structures or personal ambition and empire-building. In other cases networks are formed specifically to carry out a particular project or function that would be hard to do for any individual organisation. Again, changes in policies and priorities on the part of the government often underlie these networks (Agranoff, 2006). Sometimes networks can develop more organically in response to perceived client needs, especially where there is limited perceived overlap in functions between the organisations in the network.

   Goldsmith and Eggers (2004) identify five main types of public sector networks, many relating to public–private partnerships (PPP):

– Service contracts, in which the government or its agencies essentially go into a contractual relationship with other public or private sector organisations to provide goods or services;
– Supply chain networks, where a complex product delivery mechanism is set up with private sector partners;
– Ad hoc networks, set up in response to a particular need or crisis, such as fighting an infectious disease and informing the public about it;
– Channel partnerships, in which partner organisations act as disseminators of goods or services for government;
– Information dissemination partnerships, where government partners with public or private partners to disseminate information to the public; and
– Civic switchboard, where the government connects organisations to create network to deliver particular services to the public.

This typology seems overly government-led however, and ignores the many networks of public sector organisations that have come about without direct government intervention or with the goal of delivering services that are not directly government-mandated.

Sullivan and Skelcher (2002) identify three types of public sector network:

- Contractual relationships, which are similar to Goldsmith & Eggers Service Contracts
- Networks, which in contrast to contractual relationships are informal rather than legally binding, are based on personal relationships and are fluid in nature
- Partnerships, which the authors describe as collaboration through joint decision making and production, and involve different agencies negotiating shared goals and committed to working together for long term. It is the latter which would most commonly describe educational networks.

Networks can also be distinguished based on the extent to which they are located within the public sector, are collaborations between state and non-profit charitable organisations, or form collaborations between public and private sector organisations.

Within-public sector networks have traditionally been most common, and often emerge as a reaction to a perceived fragmentation of services delivered by organisations responsible to different governmental bodies. For example, Health and Social services typically resort under separate government ministries and are delivered by different institutions. In view of the many services such as health prevention that are more usefully seen as partnerships between health and social services, joint networks are increasingly being set up to deliver specific programmes between the two. The goal of this type of collaboration is primarily to provide a better level of service and overcome the problem of overspecialisation that may hinder effective provision (Nylen, 2007). Although in principal such governmental and quasi-governmental organisations should work together relatively seamlessly in the light of the oft-stated preference for integrated policy and delivery, this is frequently not the case, as differences in organisational culture can be every bit as strong as between private and public sector organisations, and differences in accounting and accountability structures between different government ministries make networking problematic. In many cases it appears that government agencies are more constrained in terms of adapting structures and procedures to networking and collaboration than many private organisations.

An increasingly popular form of networking consists of networks between public sector bodies and not-for-profit charitable organisations. This form of collaboration has been particularly popular with right of centre governments, who see this as a way of bypassing what they consider to be the inefficiencies of government agencies by harnessing the dynamism of charitable organisations, which are also seen as having better direct contacts with the people particular programmes are trying to reach. An example of this is the important role played by churches and community groups alongside local government in rehousing efforts after the Katrina disaster, which provides an example of successful networking between public and charitable organisations, delivering many of the benefits that were hoped for by its proponents (Airriess, Li, Leong, Chen, & Keith, 2007). Obviously, as with

other forms of networking, there are examples where this form of collaboration has been less successful. Typically, in these cases cultural differences may lie at the heart of problems, especially the emphasis of many government agencies on targets and accountability, which is not always shared by charitable organisations. The increased bureaucracy that goes along with this type of collaboration may well stretch the means of smaller charities, and may lead to some charity workers feeling compromised.

Probably the greatest growth of collaboration has been in the area of public–private partnerships. This has become a preferred mode of delivery of a wide range of government projects, from large-scale infrastructure development to small-scale evaluations of social government programmes. Benefits of this are seen to lie in harnessing the efficiency and dynamism of the private sector to deliver public projects, bringing in management expertise from the private sector, and delivering co- (or in some cases, full) financing of projects that would otherwise be problematic from the standpoint of government budgets. As many of these projects have long-term implications (for example in terms of management of buildings funded by private partners), it is in many cases too early to fully judge the effectiveness of this approach, while in Europe recent crackdowns by Eurostat (the European Union's official statistics agency) on the notion of PPP projects being off-budget for governments may make this approach less attractive to government for their large-scale construction projects. Economic and financial difficulties may make private companies less interested in this for networking as well. Obviously, cultural differences are evident here, and one criticism of PPP in education has been that public sector managers lack the contract expertise of their private sector counterparts, leading to unbalanced costs and benefits of such collaborations.

Another distinction to be made is between situations where collaboration leads to *pooled interdependence,* where each provider contributes one part to the overall approach, *sequential interdependence,* where one organisations' services are linked with those of another, and *reciprocal interdependence,* where organisations' provisions are closely intertwined to the extent that, in many cases, the collaboration will prove very hard to unravel (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004).

In education we can see examples of all these types of collaboration. Collaboration with other organisations from the public sector is frequent. Where full-service or extended provision exists schools work with health and social services, police and other public sector institutions. Collaboration with other schools, which will form the bulk of the content of this book, is again an example of collaboration with other public service institutions. Collaboration with charitable organisations is less frequent, though clearly does exist. Schools frequently collaborate with churches, and sexual health charities to deliver various programmes in schools. Collaboration with the private sector has become increasingly prevalent, and takes a number of forms. Public–private partnerships have become common in education in some countries, such as England, where the 'Building Schools for the Future' initiative has led to a strong emphasis on building new schools where the private sector part finances construction, and in return typically retains a contract to service the building once completed. Other forms of partnership with private

sector organisations exist. Schools may work with local businesses to provide enterprise education, or have particular activities, such as sports, sponsored. A particular form of partnership is where private partners sponsor or set up a school as a whole. This is the case, for example, in the Academies programme in England or the free schools initiative in Sweden. Here, schools may be set up by private individuals or companies (in England only on a non-profit basis, in Sweden potentially for profit). In some cases this type of initiative can veer towards privatisation rather than private-public networking.

2.3 Research on Public Sector Networking

Many benefits have been posited for networking and collaboration in the private sector. Networking is seen to encourage experimentation, by allowing different organisations or providers to come up with a range of solutions from which government can then pick the most appropriate one. Networking is seen as allowing greater flexibility and opportunities to tailor products and services to the needs of clients and client groups better than would be possible in a centralised bureaucracy, and networking allows government and its agencies to focus on their core business while contracting out services to partners who are better able to deliver specialised services, specialisation being problematic for centralised systems (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004).

This variety of forms of collaboration obviously makes it hard to reach general conclusions about the effectiveness of collaboration. Rather, it is necessary to study different forms of collaboration between different types of actors and look at the effectiveness of these forms separately. This inevitably means that some types of collaboration have been subject to more and more rigorous research than others, leading to gaps in our knowledge base.

One area that has received considerable attention is that of interagency collaboration in the Health sector. There is considerable evidence of not only effectiveness of collaboration in delivering improved health outcomes, but also of the difficulties and costs in achieving these outcomes. The cost benefit equation in particular is one that requires careful attention, as, especially when formal structures are set up the extent of the cost requires significant and measurable benefits to make the effort worthwhile. There is, however, evidence that a degree of formalisation is necessary to increase effectiveness (Nylen, 2007).

Benefits accrue from the preventive effect of merging the knowledge of different health providers, both in terms of clients and treatments. Innovation can also be a positive consequence of collaboration, as in some cases entirely new treatments have resulted from collaboration, that couldn't have been delivered by one agency on its own. Efficiency savings are a sometimes underestimated but therefore no less important benefit of collaboration.

Nylen (2007) distinguishes three kinds of strategies for collaboration between agencies in the healthcare sector: commitment-based networking relies on trust and informal relationships, and is a low-cost strategy, though not easy to achieve. It

has potentially strong benefits, though is prone to collapse due to changed personal circumstances of actors involved. Assignment reallocation strategy is focussed on setting up formal structures. This strategy requires limited resources, but, according to Nyles, has at most medium potential benefits. Finally, Formalised team building requires both formal structures and the development of intensive relationships and trust. This strategy has high costs, but high potential benefits.

While potentially beneficial, networks can also hold considerable risks as deliverers of public policy. Firstly, poor performance by any organisation involved in the network can lead the network as a whole to underperform and fail in the delivery of essential services. Quality assurance and monitoring progress to network goals in all participating organisations is therefore a key management challenge for networks and collaboratives. Failed oversight is often a factor in instances where collaboration has failed, especially in models of outsourcing services to the private sector (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004). Contract management is important here, and one problem in many public–private collaborations is the lack of expertise in drawing up contracts of this nature in some public sector organisations, which has left them with many of the costs and the private partners with most of the benefits of the collaborative project. The level of resources required to set up collaboration and the additional workload that can be involved for staff in partner organisations are other potential problems, as is the fact that it can take quite a long time to reach decisions or goals due to the negotiation processes between different network partners (Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002). Power imbalances between different network partners can lead to tensions.

Managing the network also becomes key to solving some of the other risks and weaknesses of network approaches. Cultural differences may hinder communication, while goal incongruence may lead to major misunderstandings, as has been found to be the case in many collaborations between schools and social services, for example. As well as different goals, different levels of information between partners in a network may cause problems, and again lead to unequal gains and cost across partners, which is likely to result in a breakdown of trust and a consequent lessening of effective collaborative work in the network. Networks in the public sector have from time to time run into severe capacity problems, especially with regard to managing the network. In many cases network management has not been part of the training or career path of civil servants, who consequently struggle with this (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004).

2.4 Collaboration as an Educational Policy

In education, the last decades have, in many countries, seen a greater emphasis on competition rather than collaboration in education. In England, in many ways at the forefront of these developments, the introduction of School-Based Management, greater parental choice, school 'League Tables', in which newspapers publish publicly available school performance data, and a bidding culture where an increased

part of school funding is obtained through competitive bidding processes have all conspired to create a climate of competition over the past decades. Similar moves towards a greater emphasis on competition between schools have been seen in countries like Sweden, where regulation in the 1990s made it relatively easy for groups of parents, charities, or education businesses to set up schools and where parental choice was introduced, and the US with the set-up of Charter schools and various local experiments with school vouchers through which parents can, again, exercise choice. This has very much been a deliberate strategy, based on the premise that, as in the private sector, competition between schools will lead to greater efficiency and effectiveness in the sector. This has always been a disputed position in education, however, with many commentators arguing that key differences with private sector organisations exist. One of these lies in the consequences of failure. While in the private sector failure of businesses is seen as a form of creative destruction, whereby capital gets reallocated to more efficient enterprises or to sectors where the country enjoys a competitive advantage without harming consumers (whether this is also true of employees is of course another matter), the same is not true of schools. For a school to fail due to the competitive pressures from, say, a newly built trust school in the area is highly problematic, however. Children will still have received their education from this school, have been taught by demoralised teachers, in a class full of demoralised pupils where peer support for education is not available, and will not have a second chance at education in most cases (Muijs, 2006a). There is also evidence that one of the effects of competition is that where some schools improve, others serving the same area may worsen, largely due to a redistribution of pupils between schools, as the effective school attracts more aspirational parents and pupils and is able to divest itself of the hardest to teach, who end up in other neighbourhood schools (West, 2008). This is obviously highly problematic from an equity point of view, and it is therefore not surprising that even during those periods in which education systems have most strongly emphasised competition, collaboration between schools has continued. Wallace (1998), for example, describes voluntary collaborations between schools under the very free-market oriented conservative government of the early to mid 1990s as aimed at joint work for joint purposes, and usually as at least in part aiming to reduce competition between schools in a particular area. He sees the continued existence of these collaborations as a form of deliberate resistance to government policy and as creating an alternative policy space not only as a form of resistance to dominant policy, but also as a survival mechanism.

More recently these competition-based policies have been supplemented (though not replaced) by policies encouraging collaboration, for example through Education action Zones aimed at improving schools across local areas of disadvantage, or Networked Learning Communities where schools collaborate together to innovate. These policy changes have been strongly focussed on school improvement, the principle being that schools can learn from one another. In recent years there has also been an increased emphasis, at least in England, on schools collaborating with other agencies for the purpose of serving the so-called 'whole child', thus forming partnerships with other (usually state) agencies.

All these developments therefore clearly parallel to those happening in other parts of the public sector as described above. From this, it follows that schools and educational actors and policymakers can learn from other parts of the public sector, especially on matters such as which types of collaboration work (and, as we have seen, there are clear examples of success from the Health sector and local government), and what factors can aid or hinder collaboration. Of particular concern here are the issues of cultural differences and of contractual differences reported above. These are likely to come to the fore in education as well, not just where schools collaborate with other agencies, where cultural differences may be particularly strong, or with the private sector, where contractual differences have proven to be particularly problematic, but also in school-to-school collaborations where different schools often find it hard to agree on values and goals, may find it hard to learn from one another, and where a lack of contractual agreements can easily lead to misunderstandings and, ultimately, the falling apart of the collaborative or network. All these factors will be discussed more extensively in later chapters in this book. First, we will have a look at what the theoretical bases may be for collaboration in education.