

Chapter 9

Widening Opportunities? A Case Study of School-to-School Collaboration in a Rural District

9.1 Introduction

Most research on networking and collaboration to date has focussed on schools serving disadvantaged urban communities that may face severe pressure from accountability systems demanding improved performance, but little attention has so far been paid to collaboration between schools in rural areas, not least due to views of a 'rural idyll' where strong prosperous communities support local schools (Cloke, 2003). Indeed, rural communities tend to be more socially cohesive than many of their urban counterparts and, in England, do not face the challenges of social disadvantage seen in many of our inner cities (though rural areas do, of course, encompass sites of considerable disadvantage). However, while not usually facing the same levels of social disadvantage that urban schools do (though there are of course disadvantaged rural areas in many parts of England), rural schools confront some specific challenges, such as limited aspirations, with rural youth often perceiving less of a relationship between education and work than urban youth, and exhibiting a stronger attachment to place that makes them less keen to move to higher education institutions that are often in larger cities removed from their area (Kannappel & DeYoung, 1999). Rural youth are less likely to participate in post-compulsory education and training than urban youth, when cancelling out the impact of socio-economic status, though there is some evidence that increased provision of vocational pathways can lead to greater post-compulsory participation (Abbott-Chapman, & Kilpatrick, 2001; Lamb & Rumberger, 1999, Johns, Kilpatrick, & Loechel, 2003) A feeling of disconnection and anomie are often present due to remoteness from central LEA systems and from alternative centres of expertise such as higher education institutions, which is amplified by the imposition of central government policies that are often geared towards urban issues and take little account of the specificity of rural contexts (Kannappel & DeYoung, 1999). In small schools, accountability measures can be particularly problematic and alienating, due to the susceptibility of results to the performance of a limited number of pupils (Linn et al., 2002). Where rural areas face exurbanisation or suburbanisation, they often face additional forces of disconnect due to the divide between indigenous inhabitants and newcomers, and schools often end up playing a much less central role in the community than heretofore (Howley et al., 2005). The remoteness of rural schools from central services

can be a particular problem when addressing issues of inclusion, as the often small schools may lack the resources (trained staff, materials, funding) to address the special needs of particular (groups of) pupils (Sze, 2004). Some studies suggest that professional development can be less developed in some rural areas due to remoteness from central services and lack of resources (Howley et al., 2005). Of course, the category of rural schools is in itself problematic, with rural areas ranging from exurbanised prosperity to impoverished former coalfield areas, so any generalisation must be treated cautiously.

Because of these rural issues, some of the advantages of collaboration may be particularly strong for schools serving rural districts, where the ability to provide a wide curriculum and opportunities for all students, including those with special needs, may be limited.

In England, initiatives promoting collaboration in rural schools have attempted to address some of the scale issues confronted by them. For example, in the 1980s Education Support Grants were used to promote the forming of clusters of rural primary schools, in a programme known as the Rural Schools Curriculum Enhancement (Hall & Wallace, 1993). The evaluation of this project suggested that schools in collaborative clusters experienced less anxiety and difficulties in implementing the new National Curriculum than schools that were not part of a cluster (Hargreaves, Comer, & Galton, 1996). Other studies point to the ability to provide stronger provision for pupils with SEN thanks to sharing of resources (Norwich, Evans, Lunt, Steedman, & Wedell, 1994). Collaboration in rural districts was also stimulated by the Technical & Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI). Studies on rural schools within this programme point to small rural schools seeing collaboration as being able to help solve particular issues caused by their often small size (Busher & Hodgkinson, 1996). Therefore, evidence of, in particular, the benefits of collaboration to rural schools in terms of the sharing of resources and the sharing of experiences is evident here.

However, research in disadvantaged urban contexts still dominates studies into collaboration (as is evident from, suggest that collaboration can aid school improvement in these context both through overcoming anomie, contributing to direct impact activities such as sharing key staff at moments of crisis, building capacity, for example through joint CPD, sustaining improvement, through pooling resources and leadership, and sharing leadership. Furthermore, it has been posited that networks lead to more equitable forms of school improvement, in that by collaboratively focussing on an area they can lessen the negative impact of competition and improvement of individual schools, which may be at the expense of other schools, and thus pupils, in the area (Ainscow & West, 2006). In this paper we will use a case study approach to explore these issues in a rural, and more socio-economically advantaged context. Thus, can collaboration address similar issues as found in urban contexts in terms of short and long-term improvement and equity, what are the contextual factors that specifically impact on these rural schools, and does collaboration, as suggested earlier, have a specific role in school improvement in rural contexts?

9.2 Context and Methods

A qualitative case study methodology was employed to look at the case of a rural federation of schools, formed in an English county. Federations are collaborative networks of schools enjoying legal status and some additional funding from the government. Federations are more or less 'hard', in the sense of having or not having a joint legally constituted governing body and in many cases an executive head teacher responsible for the entire federation. The federation studied here consisted of 10 schools in a rural Local Authority (LA) in England. The local FE college is also part of the federation. Schools are diverse in terms of geographical area and size, ranging from very small rural schools to large semi-urban schools in the larger villages closest to the Motorway. The area is situated in a large rural county. This area is the most affluent in the county, as, whereas many parts of the country are agricultural, and suffering the problems, of the agricultural economy, and others are characterised by declining small scale industries, this area has largely made the transition from agriculture to tourism. In particular, those areas closest to transport hubs have prospered, and have seen an influx of commuters, though some of the more remote villages tend to have benefited less from the tourism boom, and remain more dependent on agriculture. Of course, a reliance on tourism as the key driver of the economy brings its own problems, such as seasonality and the issue of locals being priced out of the housing market.

The federation is best described as a 'soft' federation, not having constituted a joint governing body. However, elements of a 'hard' federation do exist, in that a company was set up to which certain powers have been devolved. The federation decided to develop legal status by setting itself up as a limited company with a joint governing body. An executive group of head teachers became the board of the limited company and the governors meet as a scrutiny committee as members of the company, in order to get them involved, but without the binding legal power of a 'hard' federation.

Case study visits were undertaken to the federation, during which interviews were undertaken with the federation coordinator, head teachers, school governors, teachers, senior managers, and middle managers. Interviews were undertaken with between 4 and 8 staff members in each school, depending on availability of staff for interview, which was largely a function of the size of the school. In all schools the head, at least one member of middle management, and at least one classroom teacher was included in this group. Group interviews were undertaken with pupils in three schools. In one school, one group of Key Stage 3 pupils was interviewed. In a second school a group of Key Stage 3 and a group of Key Stage 4 pupils were interviewed, a group of Key Stage 4 and a group of Key Stage 5 pupils were interviewed, while in the final school a group of Key Stage 5 pupils were interviewed. Groups ranged in size from 4 to 10. Access issues meant that we were somewhat reliant on the schools in terms of the selection of the interviewees, which means that representativeness cannot be guaranteed. Documentary evidence, such as federation

plans and meeting minutes were analysed, and three meetings were attended, one of the Federation Heads, one of the Company board, and one of a sub-committee. However, while several organisations (school, college) are involved, the study was conceived as a single case study, with the federation as the unit of analysis, in view of the fact that our focus was on collaboration and networks, rather than on individual schools. However, obviously differences between and impact on individual schools were scrutinised.

The trustworthiness of the evidence was scrutinised by comparing and contrasting evidence from different people within a particular context (e.g. teachers, support staff, and students). In utilising this framework, it is important to involve as many participants and other stakeholders in the case studies as possible to ensure that the sample reflects the diversity of actors involved in leadership in schools. Therefore, we interviewed a cross section of people involved in the federation (see above). This should enable us to gain rich data on collaborative practices across the federation, and to interrogate differences in perception that may result from roles (e.g. head, teacher), context (e.g. individual schools, or differences between schools and college), and biography (e.g. gender) as well as allowing us to draw out common themes.

The interviews were semi-structured, to enable us to clearly focus on the key research questions while allowing sufficient flexibility to react to relevant emerging data.

The evidence for was analysed thematically with a view towards determining possible links between contextual factors and collaborative practices and using a coding system corresponding to emerging themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). An audit trail was created in order that claims about could be subjected to scrutiny (Schwandt & Halpern, 1988). A report based on this analysis was presented to the federation so that those involved had an opportunity to reflect on the findings and to offer comments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

9.3 Results

9.3.1 *Set-up and Structures*

The federation serves an affluent rural area. *People want to live in this area* (head of governing body large school). The good transport infrastructure means that commuting from this attractive area to urban centres is relatively easy. Parents are generally seen as supportive.

The federation was a bottom-up initiative, set up on the urging of heads. Two heads in particular, the heads of the two largest schools in the area, took the lead in setting up and leading the federation, partly as for the smaller schools capacity issues mean that their potential to take the lead in the federation is limited. A small collection of people with a vision have driven the process. *It is essentially personality driven* (head, secondary). New appointments from outside the area to headship in a number of schools was seen as having helped in terms of getting a group of people

together who were very keen on giving and receiving mutual support. Governors were not directly involved in setting up the federation, and generally appeared to be less involved in the running of it than heads.

On the ground, the federation operates through a system of working parties. A number of working parties existed focussing on different areas, such as assessment, where different approaches are trialled in one school and shared with others, a 14–19 curriculum group that was working on developing coordinated programmes for this age group across schools, and a data sharing group.

The federation was specifically set up to address perceived challenges of working in a rural area in a large county. The need for some formal collaborative arrangement was seen by one deputy head as greater in this rural and somewhat remote area: *I come from the South East, where everything is close together; London is just down the road. We don't have that here, things are not on hand, so it is important for us to develop collaboration between ourselves, and make sure head teachers meet as a group.* However, she also felt that the federation had actually gone further than the collaboration she experienced in the South East. *In county X we used to work for our schools, but met and chatted regularly to people from other schools. Here we don't just work for our schools, but for the federation as well, and that is an additional aspect I think. You feel you are responsible to and accountable for the federation. It's a bit like being in a department. In (my previous county) we used to, I won't say hide things, but we were in competition.* The size and diversity of the county makes it hard for any collaborative arrangement to be county wide, so the formation of smaller collaboratives appears essential.

Two main issues were seen as challenges in this context. The Local Education Authority was perceived as distant and unconcerned with this area, focussing its efforts on more disadvantaged parts of the county. Also, while the area is generally seen as representing the rural idyll, there are problems with the aspirations of young people in the area, who are able to gain employment in the tourism industry, which while lucrative from the point of view of a teenager offers limited prospects of advancement. There was also a perception that the schools were not able to offer a sufficiently broad curriculum, and were not engaging with the needs of the local economy.

As mentioned above, leadership of the federation rests very much with the head teachers. Governors have been a help in identifying specific issues such as emphasising the need for proper budgeting, but the heads are clearly in control. This dominance of the process by the heads is seen as a key factor in developing the openness that has led to successful collaboration. This means the process is driven forward and led from the top.

As mentioned earlier, the federation is not just dominated by heads, but specifically by the heads of the larger schools, seen as having more capacity to engage in the leadership of the federation as well as having been the drivers towards setting it up in the first place. Getting people comfortable with the notion that the larger schools lead the federation had been a challenge, according to the head of one of the large schools: *There is a need for endless sensitivity with regards to the feelings of others, especially when there are a large number of government initiatives that*

actually make collaboration quite a difficult thing. The smaller schools sometimes perceived the federation as being the larger schools telling them what to do, though according to the deputy head of one of the larger school this has improved over time as the smaller schools have gotten to know the working model of the federation. The cultural change required for these feelings to disappear is slow, however. In some of the smaller schools there was still a suspicion that some of the activities of the federation might be aimed primarily at furthering the interests of these large schools: *When I see some policy documents written by certain heads in the federation I do wonder what the motivation is* (governor, smaller school). Schools also have different needs and communities, with some being very rural to some being semi-suburban. According to one head: *The situation of the schools means that they are quite disparate. They are less likely than urban schools to be serving people from the same community.* Distance is an issue here, especially where joint courses are timetabled, as it can be hard for schools to get their pupils to the venue. This can also be a problem in setting up staff meetings in the federation. For small schools in particular, it can be hard for staff to free up time for this.

The federation has also made a number of common appointments. These joint appointments, though still limited in number, were varied in type, from the federation coordinator to a peripatetic chef who goes from school to school organising the catering courses, consultants and working group leaders (e.g. a curriculum extension coordinator in charge of supporting pupils who were ‘not best suited for mainstream provision’). In some cases they were secondments from federation schools, in others they were externals from other LAs. Use was made of external consultants to help overcome the fact that capacity to provide services is not always present in a rural area. However, this had been done at a financial cost, and in some cases could hinder integration of federation activities into daily routines of schools, who tended to rely on this external support rather than developing internal capacity. Appointing these shared consultants was something the federation has been able to do that wouldn’t have been possible without it. *The financial support for the federation has been very helpful, as it allowed making a number of strategic appointments such as an executive officer to help run the federation smoothly. Even though it is not a massive amount of money, it was enough to allow us to make appointments and get over the problem of schools saying I don’t have any money to put in the pot* (head).

The federations programme has therefore been key to developing collaboration in this area. While collaboration existed before the federation, federating has changed the extent of collaboration by creating new systems and structures which would otherwise not have been possible.

9.3.2 Building Relationships

A key issue in getting the federation to work successfully was building up trust and relationships. While the federation could, up to an extent, build on existing relationships in this respect, as some collaboration was evident going back to the

TVEI programme in the 1980s, the deepened relationships that were desired in the federation required careful development. Building trust had been hard, especially as some schools were competing with one another for students. Relationships had largely been developed through action, in that working groups were formed that had brought not just senior leaders and heads but middle managers together, thus developing the ties that can generate trust and collaborative working relationships, especially where the working group was seen to have had positive impact.

While working groups typically consisted of middle managers, increasingly teachers and support staff had been getting together as well. A federation-wide training day was held which was seen as powerful in bringing different groups together *because very rarely do you get the opportunity to meet whole departments from other schools. Not everything will work in your school, but you can adapt things* (head, secondary school). Groups of teachers were increasingly working together as a result of this. This did not mean that everyone in the school was really aware of the federation as most collaboration still occurred either between heads or in the working groups, which were largely made up of middle and senior managers. The fact that not all staff have yet been heavily involved meant that not all the staff in the schools were as enthusiastic about Federating as the heads.

Federation activities done in the working groups were then typically disseminated to staff by middle managers. *Good practice will be cascaded down through middle managers, so in that way everyone is affected* (deputy head). This was not seen as unproblematic, however: *I still think there is a gap between being told about it and actually seeing what happens* (deputy head).

Youngsters themselves were also increasingly working together, which had broken down some of the prejudices that existed between different villages. However, this collaboration at pupil level was still limited to specific groups of pupils, and did not happen across the board.

As well as through action, specific activities had been undertaken to build trust. The main example of this was a joint heads visit to Chile, which, according to the chair of a governing body as well as a deputy head of one school has been very important in making them feel like a group. *Trust, respect, and open communication are the key things for the federation to work* (deputy head). Obviously, tensions did arise, and the role of the federation consultant, an external appointment to the federation not connected to any school in the area, appeared crucial in resolving these through extensive discussion and site visits. An example of how tensions were defused is that when the budget was set up, one school head was more reluctant and had some concerns, so he was put on the budget committee which he normally would not have been a part of. *Essentially, though, it is a case of a lot of discussion, and giving it time, if you don't the wheels can quickly come off the wagon. There is a kind of subtlety involved here* (external consultant).

In a competitive environment, the federation allowed schools to offer support across distance. This made collaboration easier as close proximal schools may see each other as competitors more than schools which are further away. The geographical spread of the federation was an advantage in this respect.

9.3.3 Impact

Participants generally see the federation as having been beneficial to the schools involved. In particular, what the federation had allowed schools to do was to offer a broader curriculum. Expensive vocational options, which had been beyond the resources of individual schools, could now be offered jointly, in part through collaboration with local businesses. Students perceived this change very positively.

A key goal of the federation had been to increase curricular provision in 14–19 in collaboration with the local FE college. Interviewees mentioned this area as a particular success of the federation. *We now have structures in place that mean that all pupils can find an appropriate course. Also for the lower achievers, they can now find pretty convincing provision* (head, large secondary). Key examples of this were joint catering courses, for which a peripatetic chef was appointed, joint health and social work and health and beauty courses, all in collaboration with the college. These courses typically involved 1 day a week spent out of school, at the college or in work settings. This provision was seen to have motivated previously underserved groups of students, improving their attitudes to school. Pupils enjoyed the joint courses with the college, where they felt they were treated more like adults than at school. The professional materials used were also seen by pupils as better than those used in the schools before federating, something that was corroborated by staff who pointed to the opportunities collaboration had provided for developing a more ‘realistic’ standard of vocational education through use or simulation of actual professional settings. Other programmes, such as joint provision for gifted and talented students, had also come about as a result of the federation.

The federation was seen as being key to the development of these courses: *It would be far harder to manage and put together these programmes without the federation* (head, small school). *We are medium-sized, so when it comes to provision for specific groups such as gifted and talented, we do not have enough pupils. The federation could make a big difference here* (head).

Collaborative approaches had also been successful in developing programmes for disaffected pupils. Individual schools had previously spent a lot of time dealing with these pupils, as the county did not have the level of alternative provision found in urban areas. A joint approach had allowed alternative provision to be provided to all schools, both through brokering existing provision and through developing new provision. The federation is seen as having been key to this according to the coordinator: *I would say that even 6 months ago we would not have been able to go this far down that road. The trust that has been built has made this possible.* The federation had also benefited from its association with the EBD school, through using their expertise, *rather than as a conduit through which our troubled pupils are passed* (head, secondary school).

As well as allowing the offer of a wider curriculum, the federation also allowed schools to organise or buy in to joint CPD provision. This was seen by most as an improvement on provision offered by the LEA, which was seen as unconcerned about this group of schools.

While these advantages were extolled, there was no evidence that the federation had improved student exam results, which remained static. *It would not look terribly impressive, but at the moment we are still building structures and processes which aim to improve this over the long term* (head). The federation feels that the DfES has unrealistic expectations in this respect, especially with regard the timescale in which improvement is expected to happen. Another head, however, attributes this lack of progress in achievement to *a certain complacency in certain schools around performance* which had led to the federation not concentrating on issues of teaching and learning sufficiently. Furthermore, while the larger schools dominating the federation felt that it was achieving its aims, some of the smaller and more geographically peripheral schools appeared not to be strongly involved in federation activities, and appeared somewhat suspicious of the motives of the large schools. They felt that federation activity had not benefited them as much as it had the more central schools.

As mentioned earlier, the federation was at least in part an attempt to take over particular local authority functions. For example, the 'Every Child Matters' agenda, which emphasises greater collaboration between schools and other services aimed at children and has led to restructuring of Local Education Authorities into Children's Services departments including social services at the local level, was seen as somewhat problematic in terms of how it had impacted on the LA and its relations with the schools. *Their leadership is struggling because there is a big new agenda out there. The restructuring means they are facing different directions rather than focussing on education.* The federation had in a way moved onto this vacated territory, but the LA felt threatened by this. *We thought that the LA would be happy for us to move onto this vacated territory, but on the contrary they feel threatened by the idea of losing control. We are a touch disappointed that they haven't just said, you are doing well, but have been rather protective and reluctant. It is a big cultural change.* (federation director). There were tensions with the local authority over a number of specific issues. For example, the federation wanted to employ its ASTs to work within the federation rather than be used LA wide. This was seen as likely to be more effective *LA wide there is a poorly coordinated system, and therefore there is a tendency for head teachers to use ASTs just in their schools. There are some very good people in the county, but quite a few who are not working well for us* (head).

A key sustainability issue is therefore how relations and power structures with the LA will evolve. The federation would like to have more funding delegated from the authority. *The reason is we are a more affluent area, and if we got a per capita share we would be better off than at present. So we would kind of be robbing the poor, if you like, but you can understand our reason for wanting to do it, and as a member of the federation I support that tactic* (head). *Where there are services that we as a federation can do more efficiently, more effectively, than we should be doing that* (head). Clearly, then, the federation can be seen as part of an evolution whereby, as the role of the LA in education has weakened, schools are coming together to create intermediate structures that can take up some of the roles which LAs are no longer able to fulfil effectively. The head of the federation believed that the move,

certainly in this LA, is towards more and more provision of services from diverse organisations outwith the central services of the LA. This is seen as a general trend, but one that is particularly strong here due to the diversity of the LA. *It seems likely that the future lies with us taking control of our own area and moving on. We want to get stuff away from the county that we are responsible and accountable for. But at the moment we don't yet have enough structures in place* (deputy head). How the role of the LA within ECM and the role of the federation and similar networks can be reconciled is a key issue, and one that should be an important consideration for national policy.

9.4 Discussion

Overall, then, it would appear that collaboration can have significant benefits for schools in rural areas, through the ability to pool resources to offer a broader curriculum and more CPD opportunities. What was less apparent was the creation of learning communities, as advocated in the literature on collaboration, and no immediate impacts on achievement were reported.

This supports views that see collaboration as having differential impacts in different areas. The view of collaboration as a panacea for school improvement is not supported, and short-term expectations of achievement gains are unlikely to occur in this type of collaborative, consisting of a large number of schools which show reasonable parity in terms of achievement, rather than models where one high-performing school works with a limited number of poorly performing ones. However, impact does appear in the other key areas discussed above, namely capacity building and resource sharing. CPD provision has clearly improved as a result of this collaboration, and the sharing of resources has brought greater opportunity in this area as well as in that of curricular provision. Therefore, some support is provided to conceptual models of school improvement through collaboration, in that aspects such as overcoming anomie, building capacity through joint CPD, and sustaining improvement through pooling resources and leadership (Ainscow & West, 2006), were present in this case study. The study also supports previous research on collaboration in rural contexts, pointing to the value of collaboration in allowing schools to pool resources. There was also some evidence of the value for schools of collaborating with those they perceived as facing similar issues and situations, as found in Busher and Hodgkinson's (1996) earlier study.

Specifically in rural areas, collaboration may help to solve key issues, by pooling resources in a system that tends to target funding at inner city areas, and by allowing schools to develop collaborative structures in areas where local authorities are weak or lack capacity. It is clear that this example of collaboration has addressed some of the issues that rural schools faced. One way it has done this is by providing an organisational structure closer to the schools than the LA, thus somewhat alleviating the distance that exists there. Furthermore, the issue of provision for students with

special educational needs is being addressed through the federation, again pointing to potential benefits of collaboration in rural areas. The federation is also attempting to address issues of provision in terms of vocational courses, though whether this will lead to greater participation in HE remains to be seen at this point in time. It would thus appear that collaboration has a number of specific advantages for schools in rural areas.

A number of tensions emerged, however. The first one was the tendency of the federation to replicate on a smaller scale not just some of the activities of the LA, but also some of its problems. Just as the LA was seen as distant and dominated by the more urban and coastal areas, the federation was seen by some of the peripheral schools as dominated by the larger, more central schools. A second tension was that between competition and collaboration, a problem for all collaborative activity taking place in a quasi-marketised system where schools are held individually accountable for results. Having many meetings and joint activities had helped build up trust, and there appeared to be positive relations between heads. However, a measure of distrust still existed regarding the motivation of the leading schools, in particular among governors. The issue of accountability therefore remains particularly problematic for the smaller schools in this area.

The issue of resources can also be problematic. It became clear during interviews and meetings attended that at least part of the motivation behind the federation was in the long run to gain direct control of government funding outwith the LA, which was seen as disadvantaging this group of schools. However, the main reason for lower per capita funding for these schools in comparison with other LA areas was due to the far more disadvantaged intakes of the better funded schools. Different perceptions of equity and fairness underlie arguments in this area, but anyone viewing equity as requiring greater resources for those pupils facing social and economic disadvantage has to be troubled by a system in which the LA coordinating role is replaced by smaller groupings protecting localised interests at the expense of broader issues of equity in the county. It is clear therefore that the view which sees collaboration as necessarily leading to more equitable school improvement is over-optimistic, or overly bound to particular (urban) contexts.

Overall, while this study provides evidence of the benefits of collaboration in rural areas, it also provides a corrective to overly messianic advocates, who idealise collaboration and ignore issues of power and politics that continue to play a key role within networks and in the relationships of networks to their environment and other actors. Furthermore, it is clear that collaboration is contextual, able to fulfil different goals in different contexts. Configurations of collaboration are important here. Large groupings are likely to be helpful in terms of resource sharing, but less so in terms of short-term achievement gains. Larger groupings are also more likely to take on a more confederal structure, where schools retain significant independence, rather than leading to merged governance structures or executive forms of collaborative leadership.

This case study therefore suggests that collaboration can be a useful strategy for rural schools faced with issues such as scarce resources, limited capacity in terms of broadening curricular provision, and remoteness from local authority decision-making centres, but also that the role of LAs may remain crucial in ensuring equity at a broader level.