

**Using collaboration as a
strategy for improving
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the difference?**

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This paper summarises the findings of an investigation into the potential of collaboration between schools as a strategy for supporting development in schools facing complex and challenging circumstances. The study was commissioned by the National College for School Leadership.

It was suggested that we define schools in complex and challenging circumstances as being those that face multiple challenges: from their locations, the pupil mix, parental attitudes, staffing difficulties, and their own histories. Our previous work led us to be anxious about the limitations of such a formulation, not least in the way it might imply a deficit view of certain schools, and the students and communities they serve. This being the case, we preferred to adopt a perspective that focused on groups of learners who are not well served by existing educational arrangements. At the same time, we recognise that such groups are a common feature of neighbourhoods that are marked by social and economic disadvantage, where the life-chances of young people remain firmly anchored to their own disadvantaged family and community backgrounds.

The study

Some relevant starting points for the study were provided by our earlier work (see Ainscow & West, 2006). Further leads arose from an analysis we made of lessons that emerged from the four major national initiatives that have encouraged schools to work together. These initiatives are: Excellence in Cities, the Leadership Incentive Grant, Networked Learning Communities (NLCs) and Federations. The other context for this work was provided by a review of the literature framing theoretical perspectives for collaboration as a process. Building on this earlier work, we investigated thinking and practice in a sample of six groupings of schools where there was reason to believe that collaboration had had some impact. These examples varied from groups that had volunteered to work together, through to groups that had done so in the context of incentives, and others that had been subject to external pressure to collaborate. Some were called 'networks', whilst others were known as 'collaboratives', 'clusters' or 'partnerships'. The groups were all well established and there was some evidence that they had had an impact on practice in the member schools, particularly those facing complex and challenging circumstances. Mostly the groups served urban areas, and they included primary, secondary and special schools. These examples have been augmented where appropriate by evidence of impact on pupils from the Networked Learning Communities programme.

The study was carried out by a team consisting of Mel West, Daniel Muijs, and Mel Ainscow, working with Anne Francis and John Hull, both of whom are former head teachers with experience of working with the Manchester group on research and development projects. Additional contributions were made by Chris Chapman from the University of Nottingham, who is carrying out a series of related studies, and Mark Hadfield of the University of Wolverhampton.

While the timescale for the study was short, we attempted to carry out our investigations in ways that would go beyond the tendency to provide rather superficial and sanitised accounts of cases that are assumed to be examples of 'good practice'. Our assumption was that progress in understanding the nature and potential of school collaboration for addressing complex challenges will only be achieved by engaging with the difficulties involved. In this sense, our cases are seen as being instructive, rather than as exemplars.

As a result of our investigations we have produced six accounts of practice, which have been published by NCSL (<http://networkedlearning.ncsl.org.uk>). In this report we reflect on these accounts in relation to other relevant research we have carried out in order to draw out the lessons, using short vignettes to illustrate our argument. In this way we aim to set future directions for further research and development in the field, with a specific focus on the challenges collaboration poses for leadership practice.

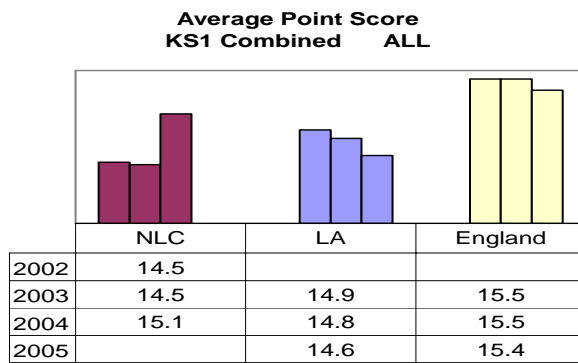
Impact

Impact on pupils

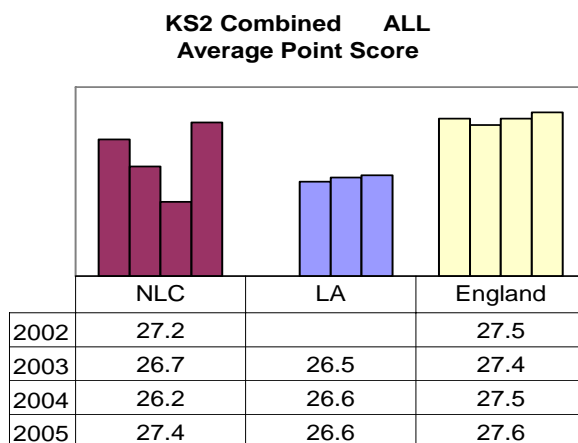
Although we can track improved educational standards in terms of attainment and value added measures of progress, along with perceptions of impact on pupils' achievement or attitudes, in schools involved in networks or partnerships, it is impossible to draw direct causal connections between these developments and the schools' engagement in collaboration (see Hadfield et al, 2006). Schools involved in programmes such as Networked Learning Communities will have been involved previously or simultaneously in parallel initiatives intended to raise standards, some of which (such as Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zones) also encouraged collaboration and are addressed in this study. Despite this, analysis of the NLC programme has suggested that it is likely that network activity contributed to better results at Key Stage 2 amongst participation primary schools and at secondary level at GCSE. The weak but positive patterns are consistent at KS2 and 4 and point to greater reported engagement with network activity and improved attainment. (Sammons & Mujtaba, 2006: 44-45)

Further analysis using Free School Meals eligibility as a measure of social and economic disadvantage has revealed that across the NLC schools as a whole there was a strong overall pattern of association between higher levels of disadvantage and lower levels of attainment at the school level. However, a small number of schools did not conform to this overall trend and showed relatively better results than most schools with similarly disadvantaged intakes. For instance, 1.7% of all KS4 NLC schools (5 in total) with high levels of FSM (35+ to 50%) obtained KS4 results in the top and second quartiles of attainment. A number of schools were also identified that succeeded against the odds at KS3 and KS2 (Mujtaba & Sammons, 2006: 21).

To give an example, one large NLC in the West Midlands with 25.5% of pupils eligible for free school meals made a significant difference to attainment, outperforming other schools in its local authority and reversing the previous decline in attainment.



The reversal of results at KS1 was mirrored at KS2 and followed a sharp decline in results.



Recent evidence from the network emphasised how important the network had been in modelling collaborative working, bringing schools together and, ironically, 'breaking down the destructive influence of league tables'. Its success at improving pupils' experiences in a relatively disadvantaged area has also attracted attention from the local authority as it establishes new collaborative structures in the locality.

These statistical snapshots emphasise the complexity of attempting to identify impact in this area. In carrying out the fieldwork for this study, we tried to go beyond the more general benefits of schools working together in order to probe the potential for strengthening practice in complex and challenging circumstances. In this respect the evidence we have is very encouraging. In particular, our analysis of the six cases and other evidence highlights examples of where such arrangements have helped to improve outcomes for potentially vulnerable learners, in terms of academic attainment, wider educational achievements and improved life chances. These impacts seem to be associated with the following challenges:

Solving immediate problems

A feature of many of the schools involved in the study is a sense of unpredictability and uncertainty that exists from day to day. This arises from the interaction of a mix of pressures from both inside and outside the schools. It manifests itself in terms of tensions regarding relationships between students, between students and staff, between staff, and between schools and their communities. These tensions lead, inevitably, to moments of crisis that disrupt the atmosphere of the school community and, in so doing, distract attention from the core business of teaching and learning. Consequently, such schools need to develop flexible and responsive arrangements for addressing problems as they occur. There is evidence from our research that schools have helped one another to develop this capacity by sharing resources, working together to invent new responses, and offering mutual support. In some

instances, this can involve quite tangible actions, such as schools moving teachers around to fill gaps, or offering pupils on the verge of exclusion a fresh start through managed transfer arrangements.

Schools were found helping each other to solve immediate problems in several of our case studies. In one of these, a collaborative in an urban, disadvantaged area in the North West of England which has developed wide collaborative structures, one head teacher who had taken over a primary school with 'serious weaknesses' described the practical support she had had from colleagues in the collaborative in glowing terms. This had included the loan of teachers so as to help strengthen classroom practice, which had been instrumental in development that had led the school to be identified recently as the 28th most improved in the country.

Raised expectations

Alongside such practical benefits, we have evidence of how school collaboration can challenge existing assumptions about what is possible with particular groups of learners. In so doing, such processes lead staff in a school to re-think their expectations and, as a result, think more creatively about new possibilities for supporting the learning of students who have previously been written off as un-teachable. In a sense, this involves a process of rethinking definitions of quality and effectiveness in the light of seeing or hearing about the beliefs that underpin the aspirations and actions of colleagues in partner schools. This, in turn, led to a collective re-consideration of the deeper beliefs that inform policy and actions.

In terms of raising pupils' expectations, one Networked Learning Community operating in a deprived part of north west England demonstrated significant effects on pupils' aspirations through the introduction of a Philosophy for Children programme. In the words of one head teacher, as a result: *"Lessons are no longer teacher-led. Children are no longer passive learners. It's made such a difference to those children, especially their confidence in speaking [...] It's given them a voice, a voice to speak out and express their opinion"* (Spender, 2005b). This echoes evidence of attitudinal changes in pupils from the Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zone initiatives (Hadfield et al, 2006: 4).

An example of this can be found in a two-school federation in a disadvantaged urban area in the Midlands, where a highly successful secondary school had federated with a school that was seen as failing. One of the first actions of the new head of the failing school, appointed following federation on the instigation of the executive head of the federation, who was also the head of the successful school, was to start a Saturday school (as existed in the successful school). The head described the initial cynicism of staff in the school: "They'll never come! They don't come for us!". In fact 35 and 40 attended in the first two weeks. Soon there were 50. This gave early important messages to staff and students put in train the process of raised expectations of pupils in this school. "The faces of some of the older staff, when I told them 35 had come, were a picture". The Saturday schools are still running successfully in this school. which has spectacularly raised attainment in recent years.

Addressing vulnerable groups of learners

These changes in thinking point to new possibilities for addressing the needs of students who are vulnerable to under-achievement, marginalization and exclusion. This reflects the findings of the systematic review of the impact of networking and collaboration (Bell et al, 2006: 65). Interestingly, we have examples of where this has been particularly valuable in schools that are regarded as being generally successful, even though they fail to reach a minority of their students. Senior staff in such schools gave vivid accounts about how their thinking and practices had been challenged as a result of learning about the way apparently less successful partner school had strategies for dealing with students who challenge the status quo. In such contexts, students who had previously been seen as problems, become redefined as a source of feedback as to what needs to be done to move thinking and practice forward.

The impact of collaboration on addressing vulnerable groups of learners can be seen in a collaborative of 11 schools in a rural area. While the area is not classed as disadvantaged using traditional measures, there is nevertheless, as one head says, *“Real deprivation in this community. There is underachievement.”* Collaboration has allowed schools to address the needs of these learners through shared pastoral care, policies on inclusion and curricular provision.

Widening opportunities

Given this analysis, it is perhaps not surprising that one area that seems to lend itself to collaboration between schools is that of curriculum development. For too long it has been assumed that the National Curriculum is the curriculum. Our own view is that whilst it provides the framework and content for curriculum development, the process of creating an appropriate curriculum has to be taken forward in schools, taking account of the context in which they operate and the need to personalise learning opportunities. In our research we saw evidence of how schools can support one another in taking on this task. At the primary level there were examples of how cross-school subject or theme groups had added to the capacity of individual schools; and in the secondary sector we saw impressive examples of how curriculum opportunities had been widened, particularly at the 14-19 stage. In these ways, schools help one another in developing curricula that take account of learner diversity.

In one NLC located in inner London with an ethnically diverse, highly mobile and growing population, the focus on the implementation of a creative curriculum has had significant impact on pupils’ experiences of learning. As a Year 1 teacher commented: *“I have found that the children who speak English as an additional language are so much more included and participate more readily in each of the lessons. Such is also the case with the children who have SEN. The main reason is the large amount of hands-on participation and involvement that each child has in the lesson”*. One of the network’s learning mentors also found evidence of attitudinal change: *“Children with low self-esteem are given greater opportunities to access the curriculum in a creative and interesting way that gives them greater opportunities for success. It also gives them the chance to become more responsible by taking part in performances”*. This was also reflected in attainment scores. Four of the network’s six schools had a history of low attainment compared with other schools in the local authority, a trend which was reversed in 2004 when three of the four schools exceed the LA’s average attainment figures and two exceeded national averages. (Spender, 2005a).

We saw a number of collaboratives very actively engaged in widening curricular opportunities by developing joint courses that the schools would not have had the resources to provide individually. In one local authority serving a post-industrial community in the North of England, schools in the three local collaboratives provide joint vocational options, often in collaboration with the local FE college. For example, the college and one collaborative of four schools work together to provide catering courses for students across the collaborative, using the industrial kitchen facilities present in one of the schools. As well as widening opportunities, the closer relationship with the college this has produced is seen as a major advantage of this approach. As one head commented: *“The College is now a partner. It now knows the secondary schools far better. An example is that our schools’ success at GCSE ICT produced more students with aptitude than the College had formerly been aware of. Now it is providing kit and courses in response to this capacity.”*

In summary, together this evidence indicates that school-to-school collaboration can lead to practical actions that can have an immediate impact, and longer-term cultural and curricular changes that help to create a greater capacity for responding to pupil diversity.

Factors associated with success

While these findings are encouraging, they do not imply that school collaboration is a simple strategy that readily brings about such successes. The processes involved are socially complex and time consuming; and, as we have previously argued, they can easily result in lots of rather aimless meetings and time-consuming talk that has little or no impact. Consequently, we need to understand much more about where collaboration can have a pay-off and the factors that are necessary in order for it to be effective.

Our scrutiny of the evidence regarding these six groups of schools tends to confirm and further refine the conclusions of our earlier research regarding the factors that are important to successful school-to-school collaboration. In summary these relate to five interconnected areas, as follows:

Contextual factors

Given the social processes involved, it is inevitable that collaboration will look different from place to place. In other words, there is not one format that will fit every context. So, for example, there is considerable variation in respect to the numbers of schools involved. In our sample, this varied from two to twenty schools. It is also clear that the development of such arrangements is influenced by local history. In particular, previous experiences of partnerships that are recalled as being successful appear to be helpful in encouraging further cooperation. Geography also plays a part, although again there are different patterns. Sometimes, proximity can be helpful, whilst in other contexts the impact of competition between schools in a district may create barriers to progress. Some apparently successful collaboratives have been set up to draw together schools from different areas in order to reduce the impact of competition. Certainly, there is strong evidence that is helpful to have the involvement of schools that face varied circumstances and bring with them different strengths and challenges.

One of the factors that has differentiated impacts on collaboration is geography. In the collaborative in the Midlands mentioned above, the two schools, while in the same LA, are geographically separate and do not have overlapping catchment areas. This has helped create trust in the failing school, when asked to form a federation with the successful school. By contrast, the three collaboratives in a Northern borough were organized around geographical proximity, and in some cases schools therefore share (parts of) catchment areas. Furthermore, demographic change means that the overall number of schools in the authority will have to be decreased. The collaboration that is preceding the necessary merger of schools has greatly aided in reducing the tensions that would otherwise arise.

Motives

The evidence is that many schools welcome the idea of working more closely with other schools. To some extent this may be a predictable reaction of staff to what they see as the overuse of competition as a strategy for driving school improvement. It is also true that some heads are motivated by what they see as a means of gaining access to additional resources through joint bidding. On the other hand, our evidence indicates that many school staff are motivated by a belief in the value of working together as a means of extending their own professional learning and, therefore, as a contribution to their ongoing efforts to find ways of improving the quality of education they provide for their students. In this context, some also seem to recognise the potential power of difference as a resource for stimulating new thinking, experimentation and better practice. The evidence is that successful partnerships are often created as a result of powerful individuals who have a strong personal commitment to the idea of collaboration and are prepared to drive things forward.

A commitment to collaboration for the benefit of pupils across the schools involved was evident in many case studies. One interviewee in the Northern authority mentioned above, for example, commented that *"It isn't any longer about just succeeding in your own school. It's all the Borough's children that actually count"*, and several other interviewees in this area made similar comments on the importance of providing a suitable and high quality education to all the local pupils, rather than just those in their school.

Attitudes and relationships

This analysis reaffirms the importance of seeing the process as being essentially about social learning. It follows that successful collaboration between schools is more likely to be effective where there are collaborative cultures in individual schools. That is to say, where those within a school community have learnt the benefits of interdependent learning, it is likely that they will be motivated to take opportunities to learn from and with colleagues in other schools. All of this requires schools in which relationships are characterized by trust and openness, qualities which are then taken on into relationships and partnerships that are created with other schools (echoed in Chapman et al, 2005:12). A sense of trust and openness becomes very evident when colleagues within a group of schools are prepared to share data regarding policies, practices and outcomes. All of this requires what might be called an 'inquiring stance', within which evidence is seen as an engine for change. This also requires a joint commitment to values related to notions of equity and social justice. In other words, groups of professionals who share a commitment to finding ways of reaching out to all of their students see the need to draw on the resources of others in their schools and in other schools.

The growth of trust is an important aspect in helping to make collaboration work. This was evident in all the examples we looked at. In one network of (mainly primary) schools serving a disadvantaged community in London, heads claimed that through working together they have built up high levels of trust which has led to very close collaboration between schools. Heads said they were supportive before the network existed, but that now the focus of their mutual support is on learning. "I felt we were missing out an awful lot" said one head "Now we are meeting more often and about professional issues so social relationships have improved".

Structures and roles

Since all of this involves the social process of learning, it also requires the establishment of appropriate organisational arrangements. In the examples we have scrutinised this involved the establishment of agreed principles upon which partnerships are based, and tightly defined protocols and ‘contracts’ that make those involved accountable to one another. So, for example, in one group, heads explained that if you do not attend the meetings, your school does not have access to the money that is available. The study also pointed to some very promising examples of how school collaboration can provide a better context for creating the new forms of relationships that are necessary in order to introduce the multi-agency working that is essential to the implementation of the *Every Child Matters* policy.

In one local authority in the North West, multi-agency work is coordinated through the network. The special school, which is part of the collaborative is now known as the support centre. The partnership arrangements that have developed between this centre and the mainstream schools are described as ‘very healthy’. Members of various support services, such as educational psychologists, education welfare officers, and speech and language therapists, are now based at the support centre and, as a result, it is felt that schools are able to access support and advice more efficiently.

Management and leadership

The features we have outlined involve a complex range of interconnected factors. This being the case, it is not surprising that successful partnership arrangements demand effective management and leadership. The evidence we have indicates that this involves forms of shared responsibility of the sort that is orchestrated through written agreements and then strengthened through experiences of learning how to work together. This, in turn, involves learning how to learn from difference, how to use evidence as an engine for change and how to define areas that would benefit from collaborative action. While the attitudes and skills of head teachers are clearly crucial, particularly in terms of both promoting and resourcing collaboration (Chapman et al, 2005: 9), the evidence is that schools that have experience of shared management arrangements within their own organisations are more likely to be able to contribute to management and leadership within a group of schools. All of this has implications for the roles of staff from local authorities. Here the current context remains full of confusion, uncertainties and, sometimes, tensions. In some instances groups of schools see themselves as developing autonomous structures because of dissatisfaction with their local authorities. Indeed, what are seen as ‘weak’ local authorities have provided the impetus for strong collaborative networks to emerge in many cases, as schools seek to recreate intermediate support structures the authority can no longer supply. Elsewhere, we find examples of how staff from the local authority have had central roles in facilitating partnership arrangements. Such arrangements have involved those involved in exploring new relationships and new roles. In this context, the delegation of resources from the authority to groups of schools has been a powerful lever for change.

Weak local authority structures were in some cases clear drivers of collaboration. In the London network, for example, the ineffective functioning of the authority had left a vacuum that was filled by the external charity that led the collaborative. In many ways the services delivered by the collaborative there are similar to that of a small successful local education authority but there are significant differences. “*It’s our own little LEA*”, said one head, “*but they work for us. They’re linked to external agencies but not driven by them.*” The collaborative central team listens to heads and is more responsive to the needs of schools than to the demands of government and this, according to heads, is why it is successful.

Conclusion

The evidence we summarise in this report indicates that, under the right circumstances, school-to-school collaboration is a powerful means of strengthening the capacity of schools to address complex and challenging circumstances. More specifically, these findings and our previous research suggest that the evidence is:

- *strong* that collaboration can widen opportunities and help address vulnerable groups of learners,
- *moderate* that collaboration is effective in helping solve immediate problems, and
- *modest* to weak that it is effective in raising expectations.

There is also strong evidence of impact on pupils' attainment, achievement and engagement in some groups of schools. At the same time, as we have outlined, collaboration is not a straightforward option that can be easily introduced, nor is it necessarily suited to all contexts and challenges. The evidence is that its success demands certain conditions that need to be carefully fostered and that this takes time. It is also necessary to be strategic regarding the areas of development that are most conducive to such arrangement.

As we have stressed, social learning is an essential feature of the processes involved. This starts from an assumption that schools know more than they use and that, therefore, further development requires more effective use of the expertise, knowledge and creativity that is available within given contexts. For this to occur, collaboration has to be led, facilitated and supported, over time. When this happens, partnerships mature, as representatives of diverse learning communities learn how to learn from one another's differences. A feature of such maturity is when colleagues are able to disagree, whilst still remaining cordial. In such circumstances, disagreement stimulates mutual challenge, genuine reflection and a willingness to explore new possibilities for moving practice forward. In the absence of such conditions, collaboration tends to take on the features of 'groupthink', where existing beliefs encourage participants to collude with one another in staying firmly on what they see as safe ground.

Bearing these arguments in mind, we conclude that more development and research is now needed in order to exploit the potential of what we have reported here. Questions that need to be considered include:

- What sorts of conditions are needed in order to ensure that school-to-school collaboration has an impact on student outcomes?
- What are the most appropriate areas of focus within such arrangements?
- What forms of management and leadership does this require?
- What are the implications for the content, process and location of leadership development programmes?

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