SSAT Reform Bulletin: Spring 2014

Collaboration within a self-improving school system

The need for collaboration: decentralisation and a self-improving school system

Since the coalition government came to power in 2010, the English school system has seen a significant move away from centralised forms of governance to a more autonomous and school-led system – a vision set out in the government's white paper in which they argue for 'every school to be able to shape its own character… free of either central or local bureaucratic constraint.[1] Early on, Hargreaves characterised this shift as a 'balance' between the centralisation of the successive Conservative and Labour governments following the Ruskin speech in 1976, and the complete decentralisation that characterised the system prior to this.[2]

At the start of 2014, we are in a position to reflect on the extent to which this vision has been realised. It is clear the system has more freedom than at any time in the last twenty years: radical changes have been made to school architectures and structures, giving schools greater autonomy matched by a strong accountability framework.[3] Arguably, this situation is unlikely to alter greatly, regardless of the outcome of the 2015 election. As such, there is a clear need for schools to share evidence of what works with one another, provide support across the system, and work together to drive system improvement. More has got to be done to enable and incentivise collaboration, if we are to truly achieve a self-improving school system.

Why collaboration works

It would seem to make sense that a number of people working together are likely to produce something better than an individual working on their own. Indeed, Mercer points out that significant human achievements have required groups working together 'to achieve something greater than any of them ever could alone'.[4] This general trend has been supported by a variety of literature analysing why collaboration can prove so effective. Notably Ronald Burt has shown that collaboration allows 'structural holes' to be bridged, giving collaborators access to new knowledge and ideas.[5] It is clear that, historically and theoretically, collaboration can bring with it great reward.

Indeed, there are ample examples of the success of collaboration from outside the world of education. Academics such as Ahuja have provided overwhelming evidence that interfirm collaboration is associated with improved firm performance.[6] In depth studies such as Davies' exploration of the UK Fairtrade market corroborate these findings and importantly, this

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[1] DfE (2010) 'The Importance of Teaching: The Schools White Paper 2010'. London: Department for Education
[2] Hargreaves, D (2010) 'Creating a self-improving school system'. Nottingham: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services
[3] Williamson, S (2013) *Why change is needed*. London: SSAT
[4] Mercer, N (2000) *Words and Minds*, London: Routledge
[5] Burt, R (2004) 'Structural Holes and Good Ideas', *American Journal of Sociology,* vol. 110, pp. 349–399
[6] Ahuja G (2000) 'The duality of collaboration: Inducements and Opportunities in the Formation of Interfirm Linkage', *Strategic Management Journal*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 317-343

demonstrates that competition does not necessarily prevent collaboration.[7] And as the likes of Clay Shirky point out, as technology makes communication ever easier, the potential for collaborative activity has never been greater.[8] This potential is something that the world of education, too, has attempted to harness.

A UK example of collaboration to provide support: The London Challenge

One of the most frequently cited examples of collaborative practice in the UK is the London Challenge, the successes of which are well-known and widely publicised. It is interesting to note that a key driver for the improvements made was a commitment to 'successful collaboration between London school leaders and teachers across schools'.[9] Moreover, this collaboration resulted in a shared sense of moral purpose among London teachers to raise standards for all children in the city, not just those in their school.[10] The London Challenge closed the attainment gap between the capital and the rest of the country, by providing targeted and personalised support to underachieving and coasting schools. Whilst the relationships between the schools being supported and their advisors were open and trustful, this approach can only take the system so far. Within a model which focuses support on weaker schools, there is little opportunity for true innovation to take every school in a system further. As Warren Little notes there is a continuum of collaboration: story-telling, help and assistance, sharing, and joint work and innovation.[11] In the London Challenge model, as with the other City Challenges, the emphasis was (rightly so) on help and assistance and sharing strategies.[12] The challenge moving forward is to consider ways that the government and other stakeholders can encourage collaboration which sees all schools improving together through joint work and innovation.

International examples of system-wide innovation

Fullan and Hargreaves suggest that this has been achieved in some of the highest-performing systems in the world. For instance, in Singapore the government has invested in giving teachers the skills to collaborate on new projects effectively. This commitment to collaboration (and the investment in their teachers) in part resulted in Singapore being ranked highly in the 2012 PISA tables. Likewise, Fullan and Hargreaves give the examples of Finland, where there is a national network of innovation; and Alberta, where the province's schools embark on 3-year cycles of school-designed innovation, most recently looking at networking innovative practices within and across schools.[13] Clearly, when systems move beyond assisting and sharing, to joint work and innovation, the profession is developed, and students benefit as a result. However, for collaboration to lead to innovative practice, time and resources must be available at school level.

[7] Davies, I (2009) 'Alliances and networks: Creating success in the UK Fairtrade market', *Journal of Business Ethics*, vol. 86, supplement 1, pp. 109-126

[8] Shirky, C (2008) *Here Comes Everybody*. London: Penguin

[9] Ofsted (2010) London Challenge. London: Ofsted

[10] Ibid.

[11] Warren Little, J (1990) cited in Fullan, M and Hargreaves, A (2012) *Professional Capital*. New York: Teachers' College Press

[12] Hutchings, M. et al (2010) 'Evaluation of the City Challenge Programme'. London: Department for Education

[13] Fullan, M and Hargreaves, A (2012) *Professional Capital*. New York: Teachers' College Press

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An example closer to home: the West Sussex Deputies' Network

Although perhaps not being realised on a system-wide level in England, there are outstanding examples of collaborative networks that are taking steps to innovate and further the whole profession's knowledge and expertise. The West Sussex Deputies' Network (WSDN) began as a grassroots movement in response to the decentralisation of support referenced in the introduction. Three years on, they continue to share examples of what has already worked in their schools, but are now also engaged in cross-school research projects. This joint research is being carried out to develop new innovative practice, in order to continually improve the educational outcomes for all students in West Sussex. The strength of this network is that it is a grassroots movement which responds to the network's own professional needs. As Fullan has pointed out, when collaboration is mandated, rather than organic, it lacks the same impact.[14]

There will be many, isolated examples of this type of collaboration across the country. SSAT believes that it is models such as these that, when scaled up in a meaningful and sustainable way, will lead to a self-improving school system.

Recommendations

Although there will always remain a place for the sharing of good ideas, and for targeted support for weaker schools, SSAT advocates collaboration that leads to innovative new ideas. Without such joint innovation, there will inevitably be a limitation to the extent to which the system will drive itself forward. Therefore, we recommend:

- To continue supporting weaker schools with the help and assistance of high-performing schools, in line with the recommendations from the Ofsted 'London Challenge' report.
- At the same time, a shift in emphasis towards joint work and innovation that will benefit all schools in the system, ensuring quality and equity
- Incentivise and actively encourage collaboration between schools without mandating any particular structure, project or model.
- To ensure that collaborative practice is a key component of initial teacher training
- Work with a range of organisations that can provide capacity for collaboration to ensure:
  - Collaboration takes place at local and national level,
  - Collaboration is focused without being narrow.

Middlehurst & Smith
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[14] Fullan M (2013) 'How are we developing our school workforce', *The new professionalism*. London: SSAT & SecEd

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If you have any comments we would be delighted to hear them.

Please feel free to email us:

tom.middlehurst@ssatuk.co.uk

chris.smith@ssatuk.co.uk