Redesigning Schooling - 9

Collaboration and networking

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Chris’ interest in student leadership first developed at school, when he was head of house during his final year of sixth form. From this position he was able to actively influence the school, which inspired his passion for education and decision to join the profession.

Editors

Peter Chambers and Jane Birbeck

SSAT's purpose

SSAT believes that teachers make students’ lives. As the world gets more complex, that vital role becomes ever more demanding. As the hub of the largest, longest-standing network of education professionals in England, SSAT exists to help teachers perform their job even better, more confidently and more professionally than before.

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This publication

Audience: Education professionals at all stages and settings, employers, parents and policymakers

Aims: In this pamphlet, Chris argues that if schools are to lead the way in redesigning schooling – as this series contends they must – it is down to them to create and operate a truly collaborative culture, enabled through networks.

Assessing the evidence so far on the role of collaboration in education, Chris observes that the evidence indicates strongly (more so than may currently be realised) that it can be a powerful driver of school improvement. But to harness the as-yet-untapped potential – and avoid the pitfalls - schools will need to genuinely understand and leverage the structures, complexities and dynamics of the different types of collaboration and networking. To help schools do this, he explores the characteristics of networks, the critical role of collaboration in innovation, and suggests a framework for collaboration. Chris concludes that, with unprecedented structural change in the system and growing school autonomy, ownership of a collaboration and networking agenda is there for schools to grasp – and that if they do so, it could hold the key to unleashing the school-led redesign of our schooling system: one that can meet both the challenges of the present and those of the future.
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Introduction

In the first pamphlet of the Redesigning Schooling series Sue Williamson outlined why change was needed in our education system. She argued that schools must lead the way in educational reform because they are the ones with the knowledge and experience to do so.¹ Set against the backdrop of a rapidly changing education landscape, this is at once an exciting and daunting challenge.

It is not a challenge that any one school working in isolation would be able to meet. However, an entire system of schools, working collaboratively, may well have the potential to meet it, along with any other challenges that might be encountered in the future. This is why collaboration and networking are so important to the Redesigning Schooling agenda. It is only by schools working together that beneficial and lasting change can be brought about.

While the concepts of collaboration and networks will not be new to those reading this, there is a certain haziness around the concepts, and particularly the practical implications, of both. As a result, there is a danger that their potential benefits will not be fully realised.
As Professor Sir Tim Brighouse noted at a recent SSAT event, too often school-to-school collaboration lacks a clear purpose resulting in inefficiency and participants who are unsure when and how to withdraw from a partnership.

A clearer understanding of them, of how they interact and what this means in practice, is needed.

Schools, of course, should not just be working with each other but with a variety of stakeholders. This, however, has been discussed in Peter Chambers’ pamphlet *Redesigning Schooling – 4: Working with stakeholders*. This ninth pamphlet in the series will focus primarily on the collaborative actions between schools.

The next chapter will discuss the power of collaboration and the need for schools to collaborate. Chapter 2 will examine current research into school collaboration, drawing out eight broad lessons for schools. Chapter 3 will explore the characteristics of networks and how collaboration operates within them. Chapter 4 will use this understanding coupled with academic insights to explore the implications for collaboration. Finally, chapter 5 will build on this to develop a collaboration framework for schools, and show how it can help facilitate the redesign of schooling.
Chapter 1

Why we need to collaborate

Almost invariably, humanity’s greatest achievements have relied on people working together to achieve a common goal. It took, for example, the combined efforts of an estimated 100,000 people to allow Neil Armstrong to take ‘one giant leap for mankind’ onto the alien surface of the moon. From engineers to scientists to the astronauts themselves, a huge number of people with a wide range of skills, talents and experiences pulled together to achieve one of the great moments of the 20th century.

More generally, Neil Mercer of Cambridge University, in his fascinating exploration of how we use language to think and work together, has concluded:

‘explosions of literature, art, science and technology, which occur in particular places at particular times, represent more than coincident collections of individual talent: they represent the building of communities of enquiry and practice which enable their members to achieve something greater than any of them ever could alone.’

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Chapter 1: Why we need to collaborate

The lessons here seem intuitive and clear: that humans are capable of far more when they work together. When they collaborate.

Collaboration, of course, is by no means limited to space travel and nor is it new. Primitive trade systems in the very earliest days of man clearly demonstrate that humans quickly realised its benefits. And as these basic systems of trade grew ever more complex, the benefits of collaboration began to be recognised not just in the sharing of goods but in their creation too. With the advent of the industrial revolution in particular, it was realised that by dividing between people the tasks required to make something, it was possible to dramatically increase the efficiency of the process. The great classical economist Adam Smith termed this the division of labour and illustrated the idea with the example of pin making, an industry in which one man alone could make no more than 20 pins a day. Yet, in a small factory he had visited, 10 men performing separate tasks produced 48,000 pins in the same time.³

The importance of human interaction and exchange in every sphere of activity is now generally accepted.⁴ This is certainly the case in education circles, where collaboration is recognised as vital by academics, practitioners and politicians of all persuasions. Notably, the term is mentioned frequently in the Blunkett Review, which will form the outline of Labour’s education policy at the forthcoming election.⁵ It is also a topic of interest for leading academics such as David Hargreaves, and forms a central part of Fullan and (Andy) Hargreaves’ arguments in Professional Capital.⁶

One of the primary reasons for this surge in interest is the current political context. The coalition government’s 2010 white paper argued for ‘every school to be able to shape its own character… free of either central or local bureaucratic constraint.’⁷ As a result some dramatic changes have taken place to school structures and architecture.
Arguably, many schools now have more power and autonomy than they have had since the 1988 Education Reform Act.

But, as Sue Williamson pointed out in the first pamphlet in this series, although schools are more autonomous, many traditional systems of support that they could have relied on in the past are being dismantled. The expectation is that schools themselves will fill the void, using their newfound autonomy.

Yet as central support for schools has decreased, their responsibilities have increased. Schools are of course accountable to Ofsted for their own outcomes, but are increasingly seen as responsible for the improvement of the system as a whole. No longer will the hand of government or local authorities be as willing or able to provide help and support if things are not going well. Instead the onus is on the system as a whole to improve itself - to become ‘self-improving’. It is a significant challenge. If schools are to meet it then they must work together. And if they do, the task will be less a challenge, more an opportunity.

But collaboration should not be seen solely as a response to the current, specific challenges schools face, nor dismissed as a fad. If it becomes the norm in the system, it will allow the profession to lead the redesign of schooling through innovation and the dissemination of best practice. It is not the solution to every problem and question faced by schools, but it can go a long way to tackling many of them.
Chapter 2

What we know about collaboration between schools

Collaboration between schools is, of course, not a new phenomenon. David Hargreaves has rightly pointed out that it has a long history and many recent examples have been subject to rigorous analysis. So before exploring its potential in our school system, we would be wise to examine the evidence of its impact in the past, and the lessons that can be learnt from this.

Anecdotally, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that collaboration is beneficial for schools. SSAT’s Leading Edge network provides high-performing secondary schools with the opportunity to learn from one another, work together and innovate. Stephen Munday, currently chief executive of Comberton Academy Trust, executive principal of Comberton and Cambourne Village Colleges, and chair of the Leading Edge steering group, says:

‘Networks like Leading Edge are crucial for schools if they are serious about wishing to continue to develop and improve the education that they provide for their pupils. The idea that we might press ahead in splendid isolation is nonsense. Learning from others, especially those that are clearly doing a good job and
are prepared to try out new ideas and ways of working, is one of the most obvious ways to challenge what you do and see how it might be done better. Our school system would be a far worse place without the collaboration that effective networks like Leading Edge enable.’

Yet despite a wealth of anecdotal support, parliament’s Education Select Committee, in its recent report into school partnerships and cooperation, commented that ‘given the high level of enthusiasm for school collaboration it is striking that definitive evidence of its impact is lacking.’¹⁰ This is in part due to the fact that pinning any particular improvement on collaboration (or any other single factor) is very difficult as there are so many factors acting on a school at any given moment. This is compounded by the fact that collaboration as a factor is incredibly difficult to isolate. However, despite these methodological problems there is perhaps more evidence available than is appreciated. And most of it points to positive impacts.

Perhaps the most well-known examples of school improvement involving collaboration in England have been the London and City Challenge programmes. The London Challenge in particular is often held up as an example of excellent collaborative practice. David Blunkett noted that it has been ‘acknowledged by those from a range of political outlooks as a great success’.¹¹ Rigorous evaluations showed students in these schools made greater progress than comparable students in schools not influenced by the programmes.¹² For example, a DfE report showed that ‘the fall in the number of schools below the floor target was greater in City Challenge areas than elsewhere, and the percentage of primary and secondary pupils reaching the expected level also improved more than elsewhere’.¹³ Thirty percent of London schools were judged as outstanding, compared with 17.5% nationally, in 2010.¹⁴
However, some have suggested that London’s success, for example, was not the result of collaboration, but that of other exogenous factors at play. Various commentators have pointed to London’s unique advantages as being ‘the’ cause of its improvement, in particular that is has greater levels of opportunity, has undergone a period of gentrification, and has a unique ethnic mix. One recent report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies has even suggested that London’s success in closing the gap was mainly a result of an improvement in primary school performance that predated the London Challenge. But for each of these dissenting voices there have been rebuttals, notably the CfBT Education Trust’s extensive report Lessons from London Schools. This argued that gentrification, opportunity and ethnicity played no significant role in London’s performance and that it was initiatives such as the London Challenge that stimulated success. Further research will no doubt provide clearer evidence. Despite such debate, the general consensus seems to be that collaboration played an important role in London’s success.

Research has not been limited to the London and the city challenges. A number of other reports have identified collaboration as a significant factor in enabling school improvement. A 2009 report by the National Audit Office, for example, showed a significant statistical relationship between schools in partnerships and school attainment. More recently, an evaluation of partnership work in small primary schools demonstrated that the performance of the analysed schools ‘improved significantly over the past two years as measured by their performance in key stage 2 tests and the outcome of Ofsted inspections.’

These results confirm earlier research. CUREE’s 2005 research review of networked learning communities identified a number of benefits for teachers, students and the schools as a whole.
However, there is no guarantee of success. The CUREE report also found that some collaborative networks had little impact. Similarly, a report published in 2006 found only sporadic evidence of the benefits and impact of collaboration. While CUREE’s evidence as a whole may not be resoundingly positive, this may be in part a result of the way the projects were carried out, rather than a comment on the potential of collaboration itself. And indeed, CUREE were confident enough to state that ‘there is evidence in this review that networks can have a positive impact on teachers, pupils, schools and other organisations’. Its recommendations were based on this conclusion.

The benefits of collaboration are not limited to school improvement, although this must surely be one of its main drivers. Other possible benefits might not directly impact on measured attainment outcomes. For example, Higham et al. have shown that collaboration can unlock the potential for schools to obtain supplementary funding and resources, as well as economies of scale. This could be in the form of outsourcing or sharing the costs of access to local facilities. A prominent example of this is when schools operating in chains are able to use their size to negotiate cheaper contracts as well as to share resources and facilities.

So, while the case for collaboration is by no means watertight yet, it is getting stronger. But despite this growth of quantitative and qualitative evidence in its favour, it goes without saying that collaborating by itself will not magically make everything better. While there is no formula that can be replicated for successful collaboration, there are certainly some lessons that can be taken from schools’ experiences and the literature that explores these.