Chapter 5

Collaboration, partnerships and system leadership across schools

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Aims

This chapter focusses on the development of school-to-school support, networks and partnerships and the leadership practices associated with these, focussing in particular on developments in England. It aims to

- analyse the rationale for school partnerships and system leadership in decentralized school systems.
- review the development of collaboration, partnership and system leadership in England's 'self-improving' school system.
- summarize the evidence of impact from such partnerships.
- assess the leadership practices and qualities involved and
- explore the implications for policy and leadership practice.

Introduction

This chapter explores the development of school-to-school support and partnerships in England. These partnerships have become a defining feature of what the government calls the 'self-improving, school-led' system (see Introduction). Most schools engage in partnerships that are informal and emergent, based on shared interests, concerns or simply personal relationships. Even partnerships that do have a more formal basis sometimes face fraught political and interpersonal adaptive challenges (Kamp, 2013). The focus here, however, is on more formal arrangements that are structured through a policy-driven process. These generally fall into one of the following non-mutually exclusive categories:

- structural governance models, such as multi-academy trusts (MATs) or academy chains and federations.

- designations based on formal criteria, such as National Leaders of Education (NLEs) and Teaching Schools.
- role-related partnerships, such as where an executive head oversees two or more schools (but not in a formal federation).

Key to this development has been the emergence of a cadre of what are called 'system leaders', broadly defined as leaders who work beyond their immediate school to support the improvement of the wider system (Fullan, 2005).

The need for such lateral school-to-school partnerships has become apparent in the face of evidence that neither top-down centrally imposed change, nor pure competition and marketization can achieve sustained improvement across school systems (Burns and Köster, 2016). Instead, the aim has been to 'unleash greatness' by asking school system leaders to work together in ways which transfer knowledge, expertise and capacity within and between schools, so that *all* schools improve and *all* children achieve their potential. There is emerging evidence that such models can prove effective in addressing underperformance and improving outcomes, in particular in some of the most challenging schools. But England's 'self-improving' system also faces significant challenges, at both conceptual and practical levels, which this chapter reviews.

The limits of quasi-markets for system improvement

Granting schools autonomy to determine how they secure improvement while holding them accountable for their performance has become an increasingly central tenet of international thinking and policy on school system reform (OECD, 2015). Such approaches are frequently associated with wider quasi-market reforms, such as giving parents the right to choose which school they prefer for their child, backed by funding models which reward more popular schools. The argument for granting schools autonomy is that it will free them up from hidebound bureaucracies and make them more responsive to their parent 'customers' (Institute for Government, 2012). Quasi-markets are thus clearly predicated on *competition* between providers as the primary driver of improvement (Lubiensky, 2009). Of course, in practice, public education systems are not markets in the true sense of the word, since the consumer does not pay and failing providers (i.e. schools) are rarely allowed to close altogether.

As outlined in the Introduction, England is recognized as an extreme example of high-school-autonomy-high-accountability quasi-market (or neo-liberal) reform by international standards. The 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) introduced parental choice and gave school governing bodies responsibility for resources while holding them accountable for performance, and successive Conservative and Labour governments have sustained this policy direction. By the time of PISA 2009, schools in the UK were

judged to be among the most autonomous in the world[1] (OECD, 2011). Few would argue that they are also among the most accountable (see Chapter 4). Given this focus on quasi-markets, competition and vertical accountability it may seem strange that England now sees networking and collaboration as central to the success of its 'self-improving school system'. How and why has this happened?

One way to assess this is through an historical lens, mapping the trajectory of policy thinking over the past fifteen years. While subscribing to the broad tenets of the ERA, New Labour's approach to reform from 1997 was markedly top-down. This was epitomized by the National Strategies for Literacy and Numeracy, which did secure initial improvements in pupil outcomes but then stalled in the early 2000s (Alexander, 2011). This led to a gradual re-evaluation of the approach and a recognition that lateral networks of schools overseen by system leaders might offer more sustainable and effective ways of addressing underperformance and developing and distributing innovation between schools (Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009). Michael Barber, a former adviser to New Labour, first articulated the idea that for school systems to move from 'Good to Great', then policymakers must 'unleash greatness' by trusting front-line professionals and fostering lateral networks (Barber, 2007; Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber, 2010). These ideas were then picked up by the centre right Coalition government elected in 2010, which adopted the 'self-improving system' label, as described below.

Another way to assess England's journey from a purist focus on competition towards a greater focus on networking and collaboration is in the context of wider evidence and thinking on school system reform. This has revealed the limits of pure market mechanisms to secure improvement: quasi-markets make only a minimal – and often differential – impact on outcomes, as outlined in the Introduction. Similarly, while there is evidence that school autonomy coupled with clear accountability can support systemic improvement, such models do have pitfalls and can lead to a narrowing of learning and unhealthy competition between schools, as explored in the Introduction, Chapter 4 and – from the perspective of toxic leadership – in Chapter 17.

This leads us to a third, arguably more existential, challenge for the quasi-market model: is competition the best way to develop the core resource at the heart of all effective schools – high-quality teachers and leaders? Research is increasingly clear that it is the quality of teachers and teaching that makes the greatest difference in outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children (Barber and Mourshed, 2007; Sutton Trust, 2011). Developing great teachers requires strong systems for recruitment, retention and development, in which schools play a critical part (Cordingley et al., 2015). While it is possible for single schools to provide such contexts, in a highly competitive system there are few mechanisms for schools to learn from and with each other. This limits the potential of such systems to improve at scale, so it is arguable that the negative effects of competition need to be tempered by collaboration.

School partnerships at the core of a self-improving system in England

Hargreaves' thinking on self-improving systems has influenced thinking and practice in England (2010, 2011, 2012a, b). He argues that simply freeing schools up and holding them accountable will not, in itself, ensure a self-improving system. Instead, he proposes moving beyond the existing architecture of single self-managing schools by putting in place four 'building blocks':

- clusters of schools (the structure)
- the local solutions approach; and co-construction (the two cultural elements)
- system leaders (the key people).

Hargreaves argues that by working together in deep partnerships these clusters – or families – of schools can realize benefits that individual self-managing schools cannot, although he acknowledges that building deep partnerships based on trust and reciprocity is challenging. He argues that school leaders should start by fostering cultures of applied professional learning – Joint Practice Development – between teachers across schools as a means to develop trust and a shared sense of endeavour.

The Conservative-led governments elected in 2010 and 2015 have accelerated reform in two directions (Lupton and Thomson, 2015). On the one hand, school autonomy has been radically increased with the extension of academy 'freedoms' to all schools (see Introduction). By 2016, almost one-in-four schools, including the majority of secondary schools, had either chosen or been forced to become an academy, while the government has announced its intention that all schools must become academies (DfE, 2016). The second shift introduced since 2010, and described in more detail in the following section, has been an expansion in the level of school-to-school support and partnerships, most significantly through Teaching Schools and Multi-Academy Trusts.

Based on an analysis of the White Paper (DfE, 2010) Greany suggests (2014) that the government has four core criteria for the self-improving system:

- Teachers and schools are responsible for their own improvement
- Teachers and schools learn from each other and from research so that effective practice spreads
- The best schools and leaders extend their reach across other schools so that all schools improve
- Government support and intervention is minimized.

While the first and last of these could be seen as taking existing quasi-market reforms to their logical conclusion, the middle two are arguably innovative, in that they seek to mitigate the negative impact of competition through a parallel focus on collaboration between

schools, with successful system leaders acting as the mechanism for structuring these partnerships.

The development of partnerships and emerging evidence of impact

Until the early 2000s, while there were individual examples of successful school partnerships in England, there was no one model of partnership that had proved consistently successful in terms of securing improved outcomes for children or addressing significant underperformance in schools (HoC Education Select Committee, 2013). This was despite Labour providing significant funding for partnership-based programmes such as Networked Learning Communities, Excellence in Cities, Education Action Zones and Beacon Schools. Part of the reason for this lack of impact may have been that these programmes tended to have broader aims than addressing school underperformance and often adopted a model of successful schools transferring their 'best practice' to other schools, leading to resistance and weak knowledge mobilisation (Brown, 2015). Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that these programmes laid the groundwork for collaborative cultures to emerge between schools after the fierce competition of the 1990s (Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009).

The journey towards a more system-wide focus on school collaboration was given shape and momentum by the London Challenge programme, which ran from 2004 onwards (Baars et al., 2014; Greaves, Macmillan and Sibieta, 2014). Faced by the need to address systemic underperformance in the capital's schools, the London Schools Commissioner, Sir Tim Brighouse, persuaded some of the capital's most successful headteachers to support the 'keys to success' schools that had been identified as needing most improvement. The rationale for this approach was that support from credible, serving leaders and teachers would be more effective than that from external consultants (Matthews and Hill, 2010). These 'consultant heads' did not work alone; they drew on the capacity and resources of the staff in their home schools to support the weaker schools (Earley and Weindling, 2006). The brief for these staff was to co-design solutions with staff from the supported school, thereby enabling Hargreaves' 'Joint Practice Development' rather than imposed 'best practices' (Ainscow, 2015).

The 'consultant head' model was scaled up nationally by the then National College for School Leadership through the National Leaders of Education/National Support Schools (NLE/NSS) and Local Leaders of Education (LLE) initiative. These headteachers and their teams were designated against a clear set of criteria and then brokered to support schools deemed to be underperforming (whereas seriously failing schools tended to be closed and reopened as sponsored academies). Importantly, the core remit of these system leaders was to provide temporary support – 'mooring alongside' – withdrawing once the supported school was back on its feet (Matthews and Hill, 2010). By June 2014

almost 1,000 NLEs had been designated. Evidence to date does indicate that outcomes improve faster in NLE-supported schools than in a matched sample (NCTL, 2013) and that NLEs increase the rate of improvement for children on free school meals (FSM) (Rea, Hill and Sandals, 2011; Rea and Dunford, 2013).

Muijs' (2015) robust mixed methods analysis of the impact of school-to-school support partnerships brokered between high and low performing primary schools in one LA has identified the positive impact achieved: 'Pupils in partnership (primary) schools outperformed their peers in matched comparison schools, with the strength of the relationship growing over time… . This suggests that the relationship is more beneficial for the supported schools, though it does not appear to have had any negative impact on supporting schools and may at best show a small positive relationship' (ibid.: 575).

Meanwhile, other strands of policy and practice were coming together to demonstrate the potential of other forms of partnership. Federations involve a more permanent relationship between two or more schools than in the NLE/NSS model, whereby the schools effectively amalgamate under one governing body. The model was enabled by Labour's 2002 legislation, but it took several years before significant numbers of schools had adopted it. Research for the National College indicated a positive federation effect on pupil outcomes over time, most significantly in the case of 'performance federations' (i.e. strong and weak schools together) and where an Executive Head was in place (Chapman et al. 2009; Chapman, Muijs and MacAllister 2011).

Academy chains, which are groups of academies overseen by a single MAT, have emerged since 2010 as the dominant structural model for school partnership. The government has played an active role in brokering underperforming schools into academy chains, generally run by successful schools. By March 2015 over half (58 per cent) of all academies and free schools were in a formal chain (HoC Education Select Committee, 2015b). By 2015 there were thirty-nine MATs with ten or more schools, seventy-eight with six to ten schools and 517 with two to five schools (Hill, 2015).

Hill's reports on academy chains (Hill, 2009; Hill et al., 2012) flagged some of the challenges for policy and practice in this area: most obviously the rapid pace of growth in some of the larger chains. An analysis by Hutchings, Francis and Kirby (2015) found that the majority of the more established chains they studied were performing around the mainstream average for improvement and/or attainment for disadvantaged pupils, but with small numbers of both higher- and lower-performing chains and some evidence of a gradual 'pulling away' of outlier chains at opposite ends of this spectrum. Salokangas and Chapman (2014) use case studies of two academy chains to illustrate the very different ways in which governance and leadership models can evolve, with differing balances in terms of central and local school-level control and resulting differences in culture and approaches to school improvement.

Teaching School Alliances represent a different type of policy-driven partnership to those described above, both because the partnership remains voluntary for alliance members and because the alliance remit is broader than just addressing underperformance.

Launched by the 2010 White Paper (DfE, 2010) Teaching Schools are 'outstanding' schools that play a leading role in co-ordinating initial and continuing professional development, school-to-school support and research and development across an alliance of partner schools (Matthews and Berwick, 2013). By June 2014, 587 Teaching Schools had been designated. The evaluation (Gu et al., 2015) reflects considerable progress overall and indicates the sheer diversity of organizational forms and approaches emerging. It also flags a series of challenges for the Teaching School model, ranging from the unreasonable and unsustainable workload required to establish the alliances, to a lack of robust peer challenge between partner schools.

This section has outlined the key types of policy-driven partnerships and some of the evidence of impact associated with them. The next section focusses on the emerging evidence of how system leaders lead these partnerships.

System leadership: Evidence on how leaders lead differently in partnerships

Matthews (2007, cited in Higham, Hopkins and Matthews 2009) had a formal role assessing and evaluating many of the first NLEs. He set out a summary of the qualities and practices that he observed, including: 'strong and principled moral purpose', 'thoughtful and systematic', 'earn trust … through consulting, valuing and developing the people with whom they work, and having belief in them', 'build confidence, capability and self-esteem in the people with whom they work, as well as institutional capacity through growing other leaders', 'inordinately high expectations, great optimism', 'decisive and prepared to take unpalatable decisions', and 'find innovative and often unorthodox solutions'.

This list suggests that the early pioneers of system leadership were driven, charismatic, even maverick, individuals, undaunted by the challenges of taking on underperforming schools, often in the most deprived socio-economic circumstances. Subsequent evaluations of the early academy chains (Hill, 2009, 2012), Teaching Schools (Gu et al., 2015) and wider partnerships (Chapman, 2013) have produced similar lists. Similarly, the heads observed by Robinson (2012: 168) in her study of primary system leaders

> had very different personalities and worked in different contexts, (but) were charismatic. … They tended to dominate the agenda, needed to influence others and had strong conviction regarding the integrity of these beliefs. They expressed high ideals of the success of the organisations and confidence in the staff to follow these ideals. While they had some freedom at the margins, they were also … simultaneously constrained to work within centrally determined policies.

Of course, one person's inspirational leader is another person's empire builder, and system leaders have consistently faced the charge that they are first and foremost interested in their own power and prestige. While Coldron et al. (2014: 398) do not see it so simplistically, they nevertheless recognize the complexity of motives expressed by the

'well positioned heads' (who, importantly, are often but not inevitably synonymous with system leaders) in their study who

> tended to take a pragmatic view of how to respond to the changes, a logic of action that could be characterised as aiming to accumulate prestige … while recognising its precarious nature and maximising their own room for manoeuver, taking charge of their own destiny as far as possible… . Being graded by Ofsted as at least Good and preferably Outstanding was what mattered most… . The headteachers we interviewed thought it was inevitable that the weak would get weaker and the strong stronger. They felt that increasingly competitive local fields are creating winners and losers.

This is not to suggest that system leadership is all about single heroic individuals. The most successful models are clearly about teams working together across multiple levels of the traditional school hierarchy. What successful system leaders appear to be able to do is create the conditions for this collaboration to happen, in particular through their ability to read and respond to different contexts and to engender trust and reciprocity within and between schools (Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009; Robinson, 2012). That said, as Chapman (2013) observes, while system leadership can be seen as liberating by some staff, for others it can be seen to increase constraints and pressures as they are required to focus internally on the daily grind of school improvement.

Turning to the specific practices that system leaders undertake – at one level, their work can be very hands on, dealing with immediate crises in failing schools and finding ways to apply learning on school improvement from one context to another (Robinson, 2012). For example, Mujis' review (2015: 575) identified that: 'Effective partnership working entailed intensive intervention by the supporting school… . A lot of the successful models revolved around doing very concrete delineated activities, based on clear and limited goals… . This intensive action was characterised by intervention in three main areas: leadership development, development of teaching and learning approaches, and generating quick wins.'

Equally though, it is becoming increasingly clear that some system leaders are moving beyond the day-to-day leadership of learning in a single school. Senior leaders in larger MATs – the largest of which might have annual turnovers of £200m or more – are increasingly seen as Chief Executives: strategic leaders who must understand all aspects of business development, organizational design and risk management (Hill, 2012). It is too early to say whether certain MAT leadership approaches – or even whether certain MATs – are consistently more effective in this than others, or how MAT leadership might evolve once the founding generation of heads move on and the sector begins to mature to reach a steady state.

Discussion and summary

The evidence presented so far indicates that system leadership and school partnerships are developing at pace in the English context, in parallel with further deregulation through

the expansion of academies. The initial driver of NLE-style school-to-school support models was that struggling schools are best 'turned round' by serving leaders who understand the issues and the context and can offer direct expertise and capacity. Equally, Teaching Schools appear to have been a response to a political desire to increase the role of schools in Initial Teacher Education and a recognition that, as central infrastructure and support were stripped back after 2010, there was a need to ensure lateral learning between otherwise autonomous schools. While initially focussed on turning round failing schools, MATs are evolving into a more widespread solution for the 'self-improving system' – a way of aggregating schools into manageably large groups that have organizational coherence and accountability across 21,000 schools. Meanwhile, many schools are developing their own partnership arrangements, often with significant infrastructure and sophisticated processes for supporting school improvement, such as the Challenge Partners model described in Chapters 4 and 19.

The implications of this for leaders and leadership appears to be that they must choose either to remain as a stand-alone school, accountable for their own performance and competing with other schools in their locality, or they must join one or more networks. These networks might offer support and security in return for some loss of autonomy. Few networks operate on a purely financial purchaser/provider basis – most will ask the member school to contribute skills and ideas in kind, while offering support and capacity if things go wrong.

The choice between competition and collaboration is by no means straightforward for leaders and most appear to be balancing a mix of both (Earley, 2013). It is clear that different schools in different contexts face different choices, with phase, geography and the history of competition and collaboration in an area all playing a role. Equally, the way that the local authority conceives and enacts its changing role will influence school decisions (Greany, 2015c), as will the development of new 'middle tier' structures such as the DfE's Regional Schools Commissioners (see Chapter 4).

The policy decision to aggregate schools into MATs and similar collaborative structures (such as Charter Management Organizations in the United States) may seem like a logical development for quasi-market systems that want to mitigate the negative impacts of competition by creating structures that can foster collaboration between schools within the group, while at the same time sustaining a healthy level of wider competition and parental choice between MATs (Croft, 2015). Such a decision seems to move the unit of measurement from the individual school to the group, effectively creating 'quasi-super-markets' (Greany, forthcoming) in which individual schools may become little more than retail outlets for their wider chain. Of course, many would argue that removing LAs and replacing them with MATs is simply 'moving the structural deckchairs' while reducing local democratic oversight, with little impact on the technical core of teaching and learning in classrooms (Hatcher, 2014). Others, including Ofsted (2013), are concerned that we are seeing increasing fragmentation and a two-tier system developing in which some schools and regions thrive, but others languish (Earley and Higham, 2013; Coldron et al., 2014; Greany, 2015a, b).

The priority for leaders in England is to develop partnerships that genuinely enhance the richness and quality of learning for teachers and children, since this offers the potential for genuine improvement. The challenge is to keep and realize this goal in the face of so many other political and practical challenges. If partnerships become little more than administrative structures to replace LAs, then their impact will be minimal, and could in fact be negative if leaders become distracted from their core focus on learning. What is undoubtedly clear is that school leaders in England must become more adept at working in an environment that requires collaborative as well as competitive approaches.

Note

1. The OECD's three-year international benchmarking study, Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), asks school principals to indicate who makes decisions regarding the school: the school itself, an external authority (such as the District) or a mixture of the two. A series of questions on specific aspects of school organization are categorized into two broad areas: i) resource allocation, including staffing and budgets; and ii) curricula and assessments.