

# **Leading school networks, hybrid leadership in action?**

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## **Abstract**

A range of different constructs are used to describe and define the way that leadership operates in education settings. This can be presented as binary categories of leadership, in which either one, or the other form of leadership is preferred, but not both. An example of this is the contrast made between solo and distributed leadership. A more sophisticated alternative has been proposed which is to consider leadership as a hybrid activity, one which entails a range of approaches inspired by varying ideals. Taking this 'hybrid' notion of leadership this article explores the nature of leadership in networks of schools. Illustrated with data from three case studies of school networks this article highlights some of the issues and tensions in the enactment of the hybrid forms of leadership encountered in these networks. This concludes with some reflections on the adoption of hybrid notions of leadership in researching and enacting educational leadership and on the place of school networks in that consideration.

**Key words: leadership configuration, hybridity, networks.**

## **Introduction**

This article argues that school networks can be considered as being one particular interpretation of hybrid leadership. The concept of hybridity is one which emphasises the complementarity of differing or even seemingly opposed concepts (Gronn, 2010) and has been suggested as one means of advancing the field of leadership research (Youngs, 2009). This is a perspective on leadership borne from the belief that the use of exclusive binaries, for example in ascribing roles to individuals as being either leaders or follows, is over simplistic and that a consideration of leadership from a range of perspectives more accurately portrays the complexity of leadership in education. This application of hybridity, for example, modifies conceptions of leadership as being something focussed either on individual leaders, or as a process of distributed influence throughout organisations (Gronn, 2000).

This article intends to contribute to this relatively recent area of leadership scholarship by arguing that school networks can be considered as being constructs which promote hybrid forms of leadership. This hybridity arises in part from a combination of the desire for networks to have a participatory basis with the need for coordination and leadership across a group, i.e. a network, of schools. The former emphasises aspirations for voluntary, participant led change (Day & Townsend, 2009), whilst the latter emphasises the need to have some form of leadership which spans groups of institutions, each of which have their own leadership structures and processes (Hadfield & Chapman, 2009).

Whilst contributing to a relatively recent area of scholarship on educational leadership, this article is of particular significance as schools in the UK, where this research was conducted, are now expected to form more relationships with other schools than had previously been the case. Since the 2010 UK general election the coalition government has developed new, and extended existing, forms of self directed schools termed 'free schools' and 'academies' (Gunter, 2011). Simultaneously the Local Educational Authorities, regional bodies which had provided support across groups of schools, were subject to a range of cuts and so were unable to provide the kinds of support that had been the case previously (Ball, 2012). Together these changes have provided a greater emphasis on schools to form relationships with each other. This research contributes to understanding that development by raising issues about the place of leadership in school networks, and by suggesting that the notion of hybrid leadership is a helpful way of considering leadership within and between schools which are members of the same network.

## **The development and promotion of educational networks**

This study was focussed on networks which had been a part of a networking initiative in the UK termed the 'Networked Learning Communities' programme (NCSL, 2002). This programme is just one example of a much more widespread interest in networks which has seen the development of school networks in a wide variety of international contexts including in Canada (Earl, Torrance, &

Sutherland, 2006), the USA (Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Falk, 1995; Lieberman & Wood, 2003), the Netherlands (Veugelers & Zijlstra, 2002), the middle east (Jarchow, Harold, McAskill, McGrew-Zoubi, & Walker, 2005) and Hong Kong (Wu, Chan, & Forrester, 2005), to name a few. Because of this international interest in school networking, the study is relevant beyond the UK, even though that is where this research was carried out. These studies emphasise a number of features of networks as which included the following:

1. A consistent feature of these studies was that networks can provide opportunities for participant led, knowledge generating and sharing activities to arise between schools (see for example: Veugelers & Zijlstra, 2002).
2. This enabled practitioners to direct their own professional development (Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Veugelers & Zijlstra, 2002).
3. But whilst participants may have led this professional learning they did so in partnership with other practitioners and with representatives of other organisations, in doing so changing the ways in which different organisations, for example universities and schools, work together (Jarchow, Harold, McAskill, McGrew-Zoubi, & Walker, 2005).
4. This inquiry led networking was believed to enhance the ability of individuals to change their own practices (Lieberman & Wood, 2003) and, collectively, to change their organisations (Earl, Torrance, & Sutherland, 2006).
5. However there was also evidence that the adoption of inquiry required a significant shift in the expectations and practices of participants, including leaders (Wu, Chan, & Forrester, 2005).
6. That the chance of maintaining and systematising change is directly proportional to the investment made in those changes. Networks lacking resources struggle to achieve lasting change (Earl, Torrance, & Sutherland, 2006).

This interest in networks in education is seen by some as being symptomatic of similar changes occurring in wider society. This is associated with networks which arise in response to a need for interdependence (Hadfield, 2005) which is not being satisfied in a world which is becoming increasingly individualised (Veugelers & Zijlstra, 2005). For teachers this has arisen in no small part because of the implementation of neoliberal education policies which promote competition, in doing so establishing individualising pressures (Townsend, 2013). More broadly this trend towards networking is perhaps most obvious in the concept of the networked society (Castells, 2000, 2004) which refers to the development of societies in which the main means of communication is via electronic networks.

Whilst the current growth in interest in school networks does appear to be tapping some kind of modern zeitgeist, it is also drawing on much more established interests in social, and educational, networks. For example Huberman was writing about teacher networks around 20 years ago (Huberman, 1995) whilst the use of Social Network Analysis, as a methodology to understand the relational features of social settings is similarly very well established (Clyde Mitchell, 1969). Indeed the term 'network society' is not one solely associated with the internet, but rather is a phrase which grew out of much earlier forms of electronic communication (see for example: van Dijk, 1993). However, as the rise of computer networks led to a new era of the networked society (Castells, 2004), so the recent interests in educational networks are drawing from a contemporary range of needs and interests, specifically from some of the individualising influences associated with societal change and education policy, noted earlier. The ways in which these networks relate to the concept of hybridity are explored in the following section.

### **Considering educational networks as hybrid constructs**

Gronn's (2009) proposal for hybrid conceptions of leadership arises from a reconsideration of the concept of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2009). His suggestion is that the weaknesses of the portrayal of leadership as being either distributed or solo leadership can obscure, through an

adherence to one or the other, the actual patterns of leadership which can be observed. This has even lead to the suggestion that the very concept of distributed leadership might be unhelpful (Crawford, 2012). The alternative, suggested by Gronn (2010), is to establish the unit of analysis for leadership research as being the 'configuration' of leadership, a perspective which is especially helpful in trying to understand leadership in complex contexts (Wallace, 2003).

The intention of this article is to consider the leadership configuration of school networks and, in doing so, to suggest that they can be considered to be one form of hybrid leadership. The concept of hybridity is used here to denote the combination of two or more concepts or activities which are, specifically in this instance, concerned with school leadership. The concept of hybridity has been applied in a range of ways including the notion of teacher leaders being people who both combine the roles of teaching students and leading colleagues (Margolis, 2012), as a concept which is intended to reflect (sometimes unhelpfully) the cultural diversity of schools (Blackmore, 2006; Ngcobo & Tikly, 2010) and in trying to combine the diverse, but related notions of 'Leadership', 'Management' and 'Headship' (Christie, 2010).

It is in the combination of differing concepts or practices that the potential for studying hybridity through networks arises. In this respect the introduction of school networks can be considered as a form of hybridity. The networks described here, and those referred to in the introduction to this article, operated alongside existing systems for school leadership and management. Although the networking literature does not make explicit mention of hybridity, it can nonetheless be seen in a variety of features of networks. An example of this is the combination of the desire for networks to have a participatory basis alongside a need for coordination across networks of schools. In addition, studies of educational networks have emphasised a range of issues which also emphasise forms of hybridity as follows:

**Networks combine collective and individualistic activity.**

The establishment of networks provides a means by which individuals might make changes which accord with their own interests and aspirations. It is this which constitutes the participatory basis of networking (Day & Townsend, 2009). However, networks are also seen as a means by which people can work together and so can satisfy a need for interdependence (Hadfield & Chapman, 2009). Networks therefore are flexible constructs (Lieberman & Wood, 2003) which provide a source of collaboration and relational working, whilst also allowing individuals to pursue their own interests.

**Networks promote knowledge generation and knowledge transfer.**

Building upon this, the conduct of inquiry is a consistent aspect of networks (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996). Networks are seen to be sites of knowledge generation by practitioners who, through inquiry, are able to make statements about what they perceive to be important in education (Sachs, 2000). However, networks also provide communication pathways and so are able to act as a means for the transfer and sharing of knowledge, either introduced from outside the network or generated from within through inquiry (Little, 1993). In this way, networks provide a means by which externally and internally generated knowledge about education might be combined.

**Network architecture is flexible being both centralised and distributed and combining emergent and designed features.**

The operation of networks is also believed to counter what are perceived to be some of the weaknesses of policy driven practices (Lieberman & Wood, 2002). This addresses what are believed to be the uniform, inflexible nature of bureaucracies. Networks, in contrast, are believed to be flexible and fluid entities which are able to respond rapidly to broader social changes in ways which bureaucracies cannot (Lieberman, 2000). This flexibility, a consistent feature of networking literature, is associated with the emergent nature of networks which develop around the interests of members and is reliant on the relationships they form with each other. Networks are, therefore, distributed through a series of fluid and changing relationships which alter to adapt to perceived need. However there is still a requirement for coordination across groups of schools or practitioners working together. This means that networks have both centralised and distributed features, and that they are both designed, often holding a range of network events (see for example: Day &

Hadfield, 2004; Day & Townsend, 2009), and also emerge from evolving relationships between individual and schools who are members.

Given the way that these networks are able to combine different, seemingly opposing, characteristics, such as emergent and designed, these appear to be interesting phenomena for studying hybridity in leadership. How this was achieved in this study is detailed in the following section.

### **Methodology: studying three case study networks**

This research comprised three case studies of school networks. These networks had all been members of a networking programme in England termed the Networked Learning Communities (NCSL, 2005). This programme, which was funded by the National College for School Leadership in England, involved groups of six or more schools working together to address common concerns over a three year period. As a whole the programme supported the establishment and operation of over 130 networks with more than 1,500 member schools, affecting approximately 25,000 staff and potentially over 500,000 pupils (NCSL, 2005). In addition to sharing in a belief that there was a benefit to schools in working together, these networks also shared a range of features by virtue of their membership of a common programme. This included: the establishment of network co-leaders, often senior leaders from member schools; the adoption of some kind of 'inquiry' activity across the network and the establishment of common networking agreements signed by headteachers and governors of the member schools. However, whilst sharing some common features, the actual specifics of the networks varied, for example the minimum membership of networks, required by the NCSL, was six schools, but many networks had more than double that number. Some networks involved only a single phase of schooling, e.g. primary or secondary, whilst others were cross phase. The interpretation of inquiry also differed between networks. Some networks established inquiry activities based around sharing, observing and dialogue. This was a

'softer' notion in comparison with other networks which had introduced systematic practitioner research supported by external consultants.

Because these networks shared a core of common features, but were very varied in other respects, they were considered as being differing examples of the same phenomenon. Regarding each network as an individual 'case' was therefore considered to be the most appropriate research approach (Strake, 1995; Yin, 2003). These case studies made use of three main sources of data, namely: network documents, the analysis of which (McCulloch, 2004) gave an indication of the origins and operation of the network in question; a questionnaire which provided a profile of network participants and which explored some of the aspiration that members had for their network, and semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996) which were conducted with active network members and which explored in more detail some of the issues arising from establishing and operating the school networks. The intention of this research was to study three networks which were treated as separate examples of the same phenomenon. As already noted this desire to treat these networks as both distinct and related occurrences was the justification for treating each network as an individual, if related, 'case'. But this was also the justification for the selection of semi-structured interviews as an appropriate instrument for data generation. Specifically these interviews were intended to provide sufficient commonality to be able to compare interviews from different participants, but with sufficient variability to enable participants to steer the discussion in order to address issues of meaning to them. This decision was based on the belief that whilst these networks had common features and were likely to have arisen from similar sources of motivation, they were comprised of human actors, who ultimately decided what form the network should take and how it should operate. This was achieved through discussion of the following:

1. The reasons behind each participant's decision to become a member of their respective network.



2. The organisation of the network, and the participant's place within it. This included a discussion of how the network was led.
3. How the network had related to the participant's own organisation, including to the leadership of that organisation and to the leadership of network activity within that school.
4. The inquiries in which the participant had been involved. This included detailed discussion of the topics for and progress of particular inquiries and also of the leadership of the groups of inquirers who had conducted this work.
5. How the participants had linked to other network members, and what they had learnt from doing so.

Each of these interviews was, with the permission of the participant, recorded and then subsequently transcribed for analysis. The negotiation over participation in this case study research was managed in two stages (Yin, 2003). First, the networks themselves were selected. Although not a significant feature of this article, the co-leaders of networks who had adopted more rigorous systematic practitioner research approaches to inquiry, were approached to ask if they were interested in taking part in this study and, if so, to share any relevant network documentation. The second stage of participation then involved approaching the members of these networks to ask them to volunteer to complete a questionnaire and to be interviewed. This, and the differing sizes of the networks involved, meant that participation was uneven across the different network cases. The main characteristics of these participating networks were as follows:

- Network 1 comprised 14 primary schools (i.e. schools teaching children aged 4-11). Their approach to networking was based around groups of practitioner researchers within member schools. The work of these groups provided the basis upon which collaboration and exchange occurred with other network schools. This was supported through network events such as biennial conferences and half termly meetings (i.e. 6 meetings per year). The core ideal of the network varied from year to year and included a focus on creative learning

and pupil voice. In participating in this research, 23 network members completed questionnaires, 8 of whom then volunteered to be interviewed.

- Network 2 was also comprised entirely of primary schools, and was a similar size with 12 member schools at the time of conducting this research. The schools in this network were all in the same city and, although they had not been previously working together as a network, as had been the case with network 1, they did have existing relationships to draw from in the establishment and operation of their network. The aspiration of the network was to identify and remove barriers to learning. This network had also established groups of practitioner researchers, with this aim in mind, but unlike in network 1, these were cross school groups with teachers from different schools collaborating as a part of the same research group. This network held regular network wide meetings and organised an annual conference. The research groups also met and worked together outside these events as deemed necessary. 90 members of the network completed questionnaires and 10 agreed to be interviewed.
- Network 3 comprised six secondary schools and one primary school all located in the same geographical area. The focus for the network was to address perceived under-performance in particular subject areas. This was to be achieved through practitioner research, initially conducted in pairs, but then in larger groups as the original research pairs then mentored other pairs of researchers. These practitioner researchers were supported through a series of facilitation meetings, with an external consultant advising on the conduct of research. 23 members of this network completed questionnaires and six agreed to be interviewed.

The ways in which the work of these three networks relates to leadership hybridity is discussed in the following section. This draws mainly from interview data and each issue is illustrated with relevant quotes.

## **Hybridity in educational networks**

This section addresses three questions to illustrate how the introduction of networks re-configured leadership. These re-configurations resulted in a form of hybrid leadership and this discussion also explores some of the features of this hybridity and some of the problems that arose from it. The following section initiates this discussion by exploring the changes to the configuration which arose as a result of the introduction of these networks.

### **How does implementing a network shift the basis upon which leadership is configured?**

There are three particular features of these networks that shifted the ways in which people from different schools worked together and from which the reconfigured forms of leadership emerged. The first of these relates to the aims of the networks to stimulate collaborative working between schools, which was explained as being a means to establish forms of knowledge transfer between schools. This is illustrated in the guide to Network 2.

*We have quite deliberately placed the emphasis on bottom up... improvement with a focus on re-professionalising the work of teachers. We wish to move towards shared values and aligned priorities. (Network 2 guide)*

These networks were, therefore, intended to establish a means by which teachers from different schools could work together, enabling a flow of knowledge between schools which were a part of the same network. This was achieved through a range of different mechanisms, some of which brought groups of staff from different schools together, others which enhanced communication across networks. Specifically this included:

1. The establishment of regular cross school inquiry meetings. At their simplest this entailed a regular, often termly, sharing of inquiry progress. These informal meetings involved individuals from different schools giving an account of the progress of their inquiry and outlining some of the lessons they had learn to date. Other meetings were more formal business meetings which brought together representatives of each member school in the network.

2. Reciprocal school visits. These meetings were supplemented by reciprocal visits, especially where inquirers from different schools had similar interests, or where the inquirers from one school were interested in an issue in which another school in the network had some expertise. These visits tended to be managed through the meetings noted above.
3. Inquiry workshops, seminars and training events. In addition to holding regular meetings each of the three networks studies also arranged some kind of external training and facilitation for inquiry. This sometimes involved facilitators visiting individual schools, but the occasions which most supported networking were those where groups of inquirers from different schools came together for collective inquiry seminars. As with the meetings noted in 1. these seminars were regular events.
4. Conferences. A significant event in the calendar of each of the networks was the annual, or in one network biannual, conferences, these had multiple functions with external speakers addressing pressing issues and with network leaders outlining plans for the network. These events also entailed presentations by inquiry groups, in some cases pupils, explaining to delegates what they had done and what they had learnt. These conferences also provided a chance for informal networking and relationship building between staff at different schools in the network.
5. Inquiry report writing. The final means by which these networks changed the ways in which teachers worked together was through writing and distributing inquiry reports. This was also supported by external consultants. These reports were distributed throughout all schools in the respective networks with the intention that anyone interested in what they had read could contact the author to discuss their work.
6. The conduct of collaborative cross school inquiry. Although the main development of collaborative inquiry groups occurred within school, two of the networks studied in particular, had also seen the development of cross school inquiry groups. In one network these had been established by design, in the other the groups had formed together to

address common interests as a result of contacts established through the other mechanisms noted earlier.

These networks, therefore, provided a series of means by which people in different schools could interact, collaborate and share expertise and knowledge. But these networks were not just knowledge sharing constructs, they were also meant to be knowledge producing. This second feature of these networks was realised through the promotion and support for forms of practitioner inquiry. The interpretation of inquiry by these networks varied a little. For example, the phrase 'action enquiry' was used by Network 1 in their application to the NCSL which was linked to knowledge creation.

*All schools will develop an action enquiry approach to learning and will contribute to the knowledge creation of the network as a whole. (Network 1 application for funding, 2002)*

Whilst there was some variation in the 'methods' of inquiry, the third shared feature was the common intention that the conduct of inquiry was intended to lead to change. Network 2 produced a guide for existing and new members, and also for visitors to the network, which explained this as follows:

*We have established collaborative enquiry as our central and most powerful vehicle for learning and are building our leadership capacity through a major investment in our... enquiry process... We aim to innovate our practice, find better ways of doing things and make our schools fantastic places to learn and work. (Network 2 guide, 2003)*

These networks intended to provide a means by which changes in practices could arise through the production and sharing of knowledge associated with networked inquiry. This intention to innovate through inquiry is one interpretation of the 'bottom up' forms of change Pennell and Firestone (1996) have identified as being common in educational networks.

There were, therefore, three particular features of these networks which influenced a reconfiguration of leadership within and across member schools. Firstly, these networks embraced practitioner inquiry as a means of knowledge generation and, secondly, they were intended to result in the development and implementation of new practices. This meant that schools in these networks were committing to providing participants with opportunities to identify issues of concern to them, and then to devise, and implement, new practices through inquiry. This shifted the role of existing school leaders. Instead of taking the lead in these initiatives, their role was to sanction networked inquiry and support members of their schools who chose to undertake inquiry work as a part of the network. This was also associated with some tensions for school leaders, which are examined in greater detail below.

The third feature of these networks was that they were intended to stimulate collaboration between schools. This established a need for leadership which extended beyond individual organisations. As explored in the following section, this entailed both a reconsideration of the roles of existing school leaders beyond their own school, and also the creation of new leadership roles which spanned groups of organisations.

### **What types of additional leadership forms and functions arise from networks?**

The aspirations of the three case study networks to adopt practitioner inquiry entailed changing the ways in which people worked together in member schools which, in turn, resulted in the creation of new leadership roles associated with the conduct of networked inquiry. In network 1, where groups of inquirers were established within schools, this included the identification of experienced staff to coordinate the inquiry groups introduced as a result of the network.

*We meet, at least every half term, and it is run really, the [inquiry group] coordinator organises and chairs the meetings, she is the more experienced member and then we all have an input and discuss things and get given things to do so... I have then been, for the last two*

*or three years involved with [the SIG coordinator] at the end for writing everything up for the writing day. (Network 1 participant 6)*

This marked a shift in the working practices of organisations which was akin to the form of distributed leadership associated with the creation of tight working groups (Gronn, 2010). In this case, inquiry groups intentionally involved a range of people who worked collaboratively on inquiry projects and established the new leadership position of inquiry group coordinator. These inquiry networks had a strong participatory basis, but they also emphasised that such distributed inquiry practices needed leadership. This was most pronounced in network 2 where members of inquiry groups came from different schools. In this network, some inquiry groups folded because of a perceived lack of leadership.

*And we were leaderless because none of us wanted to take on the leadership so we used to meet together and none of us like I say wanted to lead, you know, there was no natural leader in our group so that was one of our big problems. (Network 2 Participant 2)*

These inquiry groups provided the basis upon which collaborative work between schools could be developed. However, whilst they were intended to provide opportunities for participants to develop their own practices in ways meaningful for them, they still required leadership and the distributed participatory inquiry suffered where leadership was problematic. As well as establishing the need for formalised leadership of inquiry, the experiences of these networks also showed how leadership could arise through inquiry.

*This year has been entirely different because we've done a whole school action research project, so I've been leading that, in the previous two years [my colleague] and I were working on individual projects, this year I'm kind of overseeing the whole school action research project as well as doing my own mini-projects. (Network 3 Participant 4)*

The networks all encouraged staff in member schools to conduct some form of inquiry into areas of interest to them, with the intention that this would result in changes to their own practice, and

through sharing the conduct and outcomes of those inquiries, could also result in changes to others' practice and so act as the basis for networking between schools. This created a need for leadership of the 'distributed' inquiry groups. Over time, as groups of teachers developed an expertise in the conduct and use of inquiry, a further shift occurred in the configuration of leadership. Through their support of other novice inquirers, experienced inquirers became leaders themselves.

Some schools embraced this hybridity between leadership of networked inquiry and the role of existing leaders and saw their membership of an inquiry network as a means to develop people with an orientation towards, and as the result of the networks, an expertise in, inquiry. The intention was that networked inquiry could become a route by which leaders could be developed who would ultimately become a part of existing school leadership structures.

*So one of the things that we tried to do within the school is have ... decision-making bodies and to kind of pick out people who are interested in enquiry and get them to take leadership roles ... We look... for people whose values and attitudes seem to indicate that they... are reflective, that they have a passion for education [and] for their own learning. (Network 3 Participant 1)*

There was, therefore, an interaction between the new and existing leadership configurations with some people progressing from one to the other. Networked inquiry work not only became a basis upon which to develop practices and influence colleagues across their networks but was also the basis upon which some practitioners could take on formal school leadership roles. Hybridity was achieved in some schools where the leadership of networked inquiry was intertwined with the leadership of the schools which were members of the networks.

The work of inquiry mentors and inquiry group coordinators also involved working with people enacting similar roles in other schools but there was a need to build on inquiry in schools and develop practices across entire networks which subsequently led to the establishment of additional leadership roles which spanned those networks. For example, network 1 gave one member of staff



the role of 'network facilitator'. This formalised position was replicated in the other networks and entailed the individual concerned leading the networking between schools.

The operation of these networks, therefore, resulted in a shift in the configuration of leadership within and across member schools. This led to the establishment of formalised leadership roles, including the position of inquiry group coordinator, but this reconfiguration of leadership also established a new form of expertise in the conduct of inquiry with informal leadership also evident in the support provided by staff who had developed this inquiry expertise. Finally these networks also established the position of network facilitator, or equivalent. These were people whose position was explicitly to work across a number of schools. This reconfiguration of leadership was not, however, a seamless transition and some tensions emerged between new and existing forms of leadership.

### **The role of senior school leaders in networked leadership configurations**

The previous two sections have documented the shift that occurred in the configuration of leadership within and between the schools which were members of the three case study networks. Although these networks intended to provide a means for bottom up change through distributed inquiry, the success of this 'participatory' endeavour was seen to be dependent on the commitment of senior leaders. In keeping with the argument Hartley (2010), this suggests that the participatory, emancipatory paradigm advocated by these networks, which in turn promotes distributed forms of leadership, cannot operate in isolation from the 'solo' forms of leadership in operation in the schools which were members of these networks. This section explores how the new informal and formal forms of leadership associated with the networks interacted with existing leadership roles in schools. This is achieved through exploration of three distinct roles for headteachers in networked inquiry, of sanctioning, championing and supporting inquiry, and in a discussion of the tensions that this caused for those leaders. Each is explored in a different sub-section below, the first of which concerns headteacher sanction for networked inquiry.

### ***Headteacher role 1: Sanctioning inquiry.***

The first role entailed headteachers allowing and giving their approval for the work of inquirers. This was the least active form of headteachers' engagement but sanctioning was still essential to the successful adoption of inquiry.

*I think the biggest impact has been when certain schools haven't continued because there have been changes in the leadership... when one headteacher left a school... the replacement wasn't as committed (Network 1 Participant 8)*

Where this sanctioning had not occurred, or where a new head failed to show the commitment of their predecessor in sanctioning networked inquiry, this sometimes compromised continuation in the network. This was the lowest form of involvement of headteachers and only entailed them giving permission for inquiry work to proceed. A more active involvement was seen where headteachers championed, rather than just sanctioned, the conduct of networked inquiry.

### ***Headteacher role 2: championing inquiry.***

Championing the conduct of inquiry entailed more than passively giving permission for the work to proceed; it also involved relating networked inquiry to the operation of their school.

*Where the head teacher has clearly made a commitment... then it's been more successful. It goes without saying... because then it is going to be in the School Development Plan... It is going to have a profile within the school. ... Where those heads have teaching and learning at the heart of their school and driving their school, you've got more effective action research going on. (Network 3 Participant 3)*

Championing the work of inquirers, and relating their work to school management systems, such as through development plans, both legitimised the work of inquirers and actively promoted their work to their colleagues. Whilst relating the work of networked inquirers to other school activities did actively champion their work, some headteachers provided more direct support for inquirers.

### ***Headteacher role 3: directly supporting inquiry.***

The conduct of inquiry in these networks also sometimes entailed a more active role for headteachers. Network 1, for example, had a 'headteachers' inquiry', whilst the inquiry groups of network 2 also included headteachers who were meant to provide active support for inquiry. Each cross school inquiry group was supported by one of the headteachers from the network who provided direct support for their designated inquiry groups. This included support through negotiating time to be made available for these inquirers with other headteachers and material support, such as paying for attendance at training programmes or purchasing equipment. It also entailed these headteachers facilitating the process of inquiry. As one participant put it: "it's really good to have headteachers involved, they can make sure that you have time to do your study and that you get the support you need" (Network 2 Participant 1). So, in addition to sanctioning and championing inquiry, senior leaders more actively provide support for inquirers. To the extent that the work of inquiries was 'distributed', the two features of hybridity emphasised by Gronn (2010), of solo and distributed leadership, co-existed through the operation of these networks.

### ***Tensions in hybrid leadership***

Even for the headteachers who were committed to inquiry, this was not a seamless coexistence of existing school leadership roles alongside networked inquiry. Whilst acknowledging the participatory aspirations of inquiry, some headteachers expressed concerns about how these distributed groups were working.

*As a headteacher I had certain reservations with [how the inquiry group were working]... because I would have driven it more but of course part of our initial agreement was that the headteachers wouldn't drive it, it would come from the [inquiry group] and so that was a frustration to begin with and you could just see that if we did this, this and this, the outcomes were going to be better. (Network 1 Participant 5)*

Another headteacher in the same network believed that these tensions between participatory inquiry and school leadership had resulted in a shift over the life of the network from a distributed

model of leadership to one more reliant on a small group of people, whose work was isolated from that of their colleagues.

*It was certainly initially, a really good leadership opportunity for people who weren't necessarily leaders in school, it wasn't the people on the senior leadership team that were leading it so it was good for leadership development in other people, I think unfortunately in recent years it has become senior team people that are leading it, so although it has given them a wider experience of leadership [the network] is not benefitting people lower down the school as much as it had. (Network 1 participant 9)*

The result of this was that the distributed groups which were intended to benefit from participating in inquiry were unable to influence, and benefit from the progress of, inquiry to the extent that they had previously. Embedding inquiry in the working practices of the schools was beneficial in that it provided a direct link between school leadership and leadership of networked inquiry, but it did create a tension between the need for coordination and the ownership of change.

### **Forms of hybridity in a networked leadership configuration**

The data reported above demonstrates a shift in leadership configuration (Gronn, 2009) that occurred as a consequence of the introduction of school networks. The operation of these networks occurred alongside the existing work of schools and can be seen as a form of strategic hybridity, in which the leadership functions which existed in schools remain essentially unchanged, but the development and operation of a network establishes additional processes requiring and creating alternative forms of leadership from those already existing in schools. This study confirms the findings of Lieberman and others (Hadfield & Chapman, 2009; Lieberman, 2000; Lieberman & Wood, 2003) that school networks can result in both formal and informal opportunities for staff to take on leadership positions in addition to those already existing in schools.

This study adds detail to this feature of school networks, in particular in highlighting two features of the leadership associated with school networks. The first is in the ways in which leadership roles

associated with networks differed from those in member schools. This was especially evident in this study in the establishment of a new form of teacher expertise, specifically in inquiry. The networks also enabled the involvement of a broader group of people in leadership than those with formal leadership positions in school. This spreading of leadership is one of the beneficial features of the concept of distributed leadership identified by Crawford (2012) and in these networks was associated with expertise in the conduct of inquiry as a new basis for authority and leadership.

Another distinctive feature of 'networked' leadership is that was associated with different responsibilities and so was able to attract different people from those attracted to existing leadership roles in member schools (Lieberman & Wood, 2003). However, as noted in some critiques of distributed leadership, this firstly implies that spreading leadership is always good, and secondly, that the promotion of distributed leadership as a normative concept underplays the significant influence of senior leaders (see for example: Bolden, 2011; Crawford, 2012; Gronn, 2009). These networks managed to combine a distributed model of leadership, spread through the establishment of expertise in inquiry as a new source of authority, with existing leadership roles in member schools, as evidenced by the opportunity for people to move from one form of leadership to the other, as noted earlier.

The critique of distributed leadership as a both a normative and descriptive concept (Crawford, 2012), has led Gronn (2009) to call for a new unit of analysis of leadership, namely 'leadership configuration', and a new treatment of leadership as a hybrid activity, one which combines the previously mutually exclusive categories of solo or distributed leadership. As Gronn puts it, if 'the reality of leadership practice in organisations has been trending away from... rigidified culture and structures... towards a diversified and mixed combination of solo performance in combination with... team and other multi party formations, then 'hybrid' is the most credible term for capturing this complexity and fluidity' (2012: 389). This notion of hybridity and its association with solo and distributed leadership, have been summarised in table 1.

Insert table 1 here.

The claims for networks as fluid, dynamic and flexible ways of leading schools seem especially relevant to this notion of hybridity (Liberman and Wood, 2003). This view is reinforced in this research in which the leadership configurations of the school networks entailed forms of hybridity, combining designed and emergent, solo and distributed, and informal and formal forms, of leadership. There was a productive component to the hybridisation of leadership which arose as a consequence of combining existing school leadership with new forms of leadership associated with the introduction of inquiry through networks. The introduction of a 'networked' configuration of leadership entailed the following changes:

1. Relationships were established across groups of schools which meant that the responsibilities of existing leaders spread beyond their own school.
2. The introduction of a network also required new forms of leadership concerned specifically with leading the network in question.
3. This 'networked' leadership was concerned, in part with establishing and sustaining productive relationships between network members in different schools, but also with the conduct of inquiry as a means to generate and share knowledge. This also established a new basis for expertise, namely of inquiry expertise, upon which formal and informal networked leadership emerged.
4. This required senior leader involvement through sanctioning, championing and facilitating inquiry.

Gronn emphasises that this concept of hybridity (2009) does not entail two differing systems operating without reference to each other (which he describes as being heterogeneity). Instead 'hybridity is a mixture, in which varying degrees of both tendencies... co-exist' (Gronn, 2009: 389). One form of this co-existence has already been discussed, the interaction between leadership associated with networked inquiry and existing leadership positions. This emphasises facilitation of inquiry as a leadership function alongside others which are more closely associated with solo leadership. However, just as inquiry networking literature is not universally positive, for example, some authors have suggested that participatory networks are often not as equitable as intended (O'Brien, Varga-Atkins, Burton, Campbell, & Qualter, 2008), this study has shown an additional tension which arises directly from the hybridisation of leadership associated with the introduction of inquiry networks.

This arose in reference to tensions between the supposedly participatory basis of networks and the desire for productivity required by school leaders. The introduction of these networks was concerned with more than just an attempt to achieve economies of scale by working together. Instead it was founded on a participatory ideal in which knowledge generation about practice arose from the work of practitioners themselves. This created tensions with existing leadership roles and functions and between the operation of inquiry groups and the leadership of schools which was especially pronounced where groups of inquirers had become isolated from the colleagues in their school. In these instances, the two components of hybridity remained isolated from each other, creating exclusive heterogeneous forms of leadership in the same organisation (Gronn, 2009). It seems that, whilst hybrid leadership has some benefits, it is also associated with significant tensions and challenges.

However, this research suggests that the development of collaborative school networks can be seen as a way to develop educational practices, including leadership, away from the existing rationalised leadership structures upon which schools rely. This establishes practices and processes which

emphasise emergent and, in places, informal configurations of leadership, which can, if effectively managed, exist alongside existing rationalised strategic configurations of leadership in schools and can even contribute to those existing leadership configurations.

Networking leadership spreads leadership beyond organisational confines. Through the creation of flexible structures and processes across groups of schools (Lieberman and Wood, 2003), which in this study were based on participatory ideals of developing practices through inquiry, networks can provide a means for informal leadership, associated with influence derived from relationships built around shared interests, to emerge alongside formal leadership, which relies on appointed positions with responsibility for leading others. Networking also promotes the development of leadership, formal and informal, emergent and planned, which is spread throughout groups of collaborators from different schools, alongside existing leadership configurations, such as the role of headteachers, or other senior leaders, in which the responsibility for leading practices is vested in a small number of individuals. In this respect, 'networked' leadership could be one alternative to the notion of 'distributed' leadership, with its associated weaknesses, as outlined by Gronn (2010).

## **Conclusion**

In the introduction to this article I suggested that the operation of educational networks could be seen as a case of hybrid leadership in action (Gronn, 2009). In this, the systems and process of networks can become a site within which differing forms of leadership can be stimulated and can operate together. In other words, networks can be seen as entities which seek to develop a form of hybrid leadership which is able to combine emergent, informal inquiry driven models of leadership which span groups of schools (Lieberman, 2000), alongside existing formal leadership forms associated with appointed positions which already exist in the schools. This is especially significant in the current context of the English education system, in which there are increasing pressures for schools to form alliances and networks, as a result of extensive cuts to local authorities (Ball, 2012) and the development of alliances of free schools or academes (Gunter, 2011). The author's study of



three networks illustrates some of the potential, and some of the tensions, in adopting networked hybridity as a leadership strategy. This article contributes to understanding some of the issues related to these recent trends in leadership internationally, and in England, but there is a need for related research to understand the ways in which educational leadership operates where these forms of school relationships are being promoted. In particular the following questions are raised by this study:

1. What are the principles and ideals which lie behind the development of these new forms of networks?
2. How are relationships established and maintained between staff in different schools which are parts of these networks?
3. In what ways is the development and operation of these forms of networks associated with changes in the configuration of leadership within and between schools? Relating to this:
  - a. What opportunities for different forms of school leadership, or different routes into existing leadership positions, arise from school networks?
  - b. What are the implications of this re-configuration for existing school leadership?

In summary, with the growth of the networked society (Castells, 2004), and with the development of new forms of school to school relationship, there is a need for research on educational leadership which looks beyond organisational confines, which seeks to understand the fluidity and flexibility of leadership relationships which spread both through and beyond schools, and which does not simplistically attribute concepts of success or failure to the actions of particular appointed leaders. This also establishes a need to conduct research which does not take its sole source of inspiration from one construct of leadership. This would acknowledge the complexities of schools as multifaceted social settings with diverse forms of leadership which arise within and beyond schools. In this respect, a networked conception of leadership can extend questions about 'educational' leadership beyond the confines of single organisations.

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Configuration of leadership:	Solo	Distributed	Hybrid i.e. solo-distributed
Focus of research	On the influence, actions and effectiveness of individuals with leadership positions in school.	On the ways in which groups of leaders can work together, or on the spread of leadership through organisations.	On the interactions between the leadership of individuals, and on leadership arising through and within groups.
Interest of practice	On how individuals can most effectively fulfil their leadership roles, i.e. what should people appointed to leadership positions be doing?	On recognising, and supporting, the potential people have to influence each other either through working closely together in groups or in spreading leadership through organisations.	In implementing practices which acknowledge the significant role of individual leaders, appreciating how their work relates to the spreading of leadership.
Assumptions about leadership	That leadership is a specialised activity principally associated with specialised positions.	That leadership is collective and achieved through groups, or that leadership is a form of influence spread through relationships in social settings	That leadership is a phenomenon which is both associated with leadership 'roles' and which is spread when it arises through influence derived from the relationships people form through work.
Limitations	A focus purely on solo leadership can ignore the ways in which people can influence each others' work in a range of different ways.	A focus purely on distributed leadership can underplay the significant role of individual leaders, a role which has been demonstrated in research on distributed leadership.	For research the limitations are in the suitability of the individual constructs from which hybridity emerges, and in the emphasis provided on each. For practice the limitations are in resolving the conflicts and tensions associated with apparently competing construct, e.g. facilitation vs authority.

Table 1: contrasting leadership configurations.