Chapter 10 – Leadership across partnerships and networks

Abstract
This chapter focuses on leadership across inter-school partnerships and networks. It argues that existing research and policy has prioritised a focus on leadership within individual schools, but that this is insufficient in the context of contemporary societies and school systems. Networks offer the potential for more inclusive and rounded models of educational provision, but this is not a given – networks can equally have a 'dark' side and the chapter includes a vignette of a problematic, exclusive network. The chapter also: provides a brief overview of inter-school network policies and practices in different parts of the world; identifies core features of networks as well as common barriers which leaders must attend to; and analyses research and theory regarding the leadership of networks. It outlines three capabilities which appear central to successful network leadership: working productively with tensions and paradox, collective sensemaking, and adopting an ecological approach. Finally, it sets out two main suggestions for future development in this area: firstly, challenge the dominant focus on leadership *within* schools, and secondly, work to understand the structures, roles and capabilities required at 'middle tier' as well as school level in order to maximise the potential of networks that support equity.

Key words: network leadership; school partnerships/networks; working with paradox; collective sensemaking, ecological leadership

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on one aspect of leadership beyond the individual organisation: namely, leadership across inter-school partnerships and networks. This is not to deny that school leaders work beyond their organisations in many other ways, for example with parents, local community groups and organisations, further and higher education colleges, employers, and local and national policy makers. Although I focus on publicly funded schools, I draw on evidence and literature from a much wider range of sources, so the chapter will be relevant to understanding such leadership in other educational contexts as well.

One argument for focusing on networks in education relates to the shifts taking place in wider societies in recent decades. Castells (2004) argues that we now live in a 'network society', resulting from transformations such as the spread of digital information and communications technologies together with wider developments, such as globalization, which are changing norms, expectations, cultural dynamics and the ways in which individuals and organizations connect to one another (Beck 1992; Urry 2005). These transformations directly affect education, meaning that contemporary leaders must deal with issues that are more complex and adaptive than the issues their predecessors faced.

Following this introduction, the chapter is structured in five sections. The first starts by providing definitions for networks and leadership and by reflecting on my own values and positionality as a researcher in this area. It then introduces a vignette, drawn from my own research in England, which exemplifies several of the leadership issues raised in later sections. The next section provides a brief overview of what is known about inter-school network policies and practices in different parts of the world. The third section explores theoretical and empirical research on networks and networking and identifies seven core features which leaders must attend to in order to develop successful networks. However, networking faces common barriers and networks can often have a 'dark' side, so these aspects are also considered. The fourth section considers leadership across partnerships and networks. It argues that leadership research and thinking in education has been overly dominated by an intra-organisational focus, although it recognises that there are overlaps between leading successfully within a school and leading across networks. It briefly outlines two areas – distributed and system leadership – in which leadership thinking and practice has helpfully broadened out in recent years. It then identifies three approaches which appear central to successful network leadership: working productively with tensions and paradox, collective sensemaking, and adopting an ecological approach. Finally, the concluding section outlines suggestions for future development in this area.

2. Exploring partnerships and networks

What do I mean by networks and network leadership? As I indicate above, my focus is on inter-school partnerships and networks, although I recognize that schools are made up of individual leaders and teachers and it is these individuals who engage in network activity. Popp et al. (2014: 18) explain that 'at their base, networks consist of the structure of relationships between actors (individuals and organizations) and the meaning of the linkages that constitute those relationships'. The focus is thus on 'social ties and interactions, rather than individual actors' (Perry, Pescosolido and Borgatti 2020:4), as a means of understanding behaviour. Given my focus on inter-organisational partnerships, I adopt Provan and Kenis' definition of a 'network' as involving three or more 'legally autonomous organizations that work together to achieve not only their own goals but also a collective goal' (2008: 231).[i] In practice, this definition can encompass many different types of network; indeed, one of the challenges in this area is the profusion of terms used, including partnership, community of practice/learning, collaboration, cluster, and alliance.

Just as it is challenging to define networks, leadership can be equally hard to pin down, with as many as 65 different classification systems developed to define the field (Fleishman et al. 1991) and over 300 definitions of leadership available (Bush and Glover 2014). As I argue below, most of this work focuses on leadership within organizations, where traditional, hierarchical structures tend to shape the exercise of leadership. In contrast, leadership across networks is widely perceived to require different skillsets (Williams 2012; Vangen and Huxham 2012; Milward and Provan 2006) and a growing number of studies provide empirical evidence to support these claims (Sherer et al 2021;

Silvia and McGuire 2010). This work highlights the distinct issues that leaders must attend to in what Bryson, Crosby and Stone (2006) call the 'shared-power world' of networks, including power, control, agency, ownership, values and trust. I return to these issues below, but as a starting point I adopt Northouse's (2009:3) definition of leadership as 'a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal'.

Why and how do I research leadership across networks of schools? I have worked as both an academic and policy maker in the field of educational leadership for almost 25 years. My understanding of networks and network leadership is deeply informed by the many colleagues I have had the good fortune to work with, but particularly David Hargreaves, Rob Higham, Annelies Kamp, David Jackson and Steve Munby,. My work reflects a pragmatic stance (Biesta, 2020) and frequently adopts mixed methods designs. Many projects include an applied and/or co-design aspect, including various examples where I have worked directly with front-line leaders to shape and develop networks (Greany and Kamp, 2022; Greany and Maxwell, 2015). Much of this work has focussed on developments in England, but I have also lived and worked in various other countries. I have a particular interest in how local – i.e. place-based - education systems operate to achieve inclusive and equitable outcomes for all children and have led several place-based studies.

My focus on place-based research and inter-school networks is spurred by my interest in system governance and how this impacts on front-line leadership. Many governments around the world are stepping back from hierarchical control of schools, adopting marketization and other New Public Management (NPM) approaches as they seek to increase choice, improve quality, enhance equity and encourage innovation (Hood, 1991). However, this does not prevent these governments from 'steering at a distance' (Hudson, 2007; Jessop, 2011). Indeed, at a structural level two parallel shifts can be discerned. Decentralisation comes through granting schools greater autonomy (aka 'school-based management'), with school leaders taking responsibility for operational areas, often in combination with competitive market incentives such as parental choice of school (Caldwell and Spinks, 2013). Meanwhile, centralisation develops as governments seek to measure school quality and sharpen accountability, for example through the development of national curricula, standardised testing and the publication of performance data (Ozga, 2011). These developments have significant consequences for traditional place-based 'middle tier' structures, such as school districts and local authorities, as decentralisation combines with centralisation and marketization to reduce but not completely remove the need for local oversight and co-ordination (Greany, 2020a; Lubienski, 2014). In these contexts, I argue that a focus on leadership and improvement within individual schools is insufficient, because it risks obscuring the ways in which local school systems have become fragmented and stratified. In contrast, networks offer the potential to enable the sharing of knowledge and resources across local school systems in pursuit of more inclusive and rounded models of provision.

The vignette that follows is drawn from a five-year mixed method study of inter-school networks across four localities in England (Greany and Higham, 2018; Greany and

Higham, 2021). The vignette indicates that, for the SUCCESS Alliance schools involved, networking offers an important mechanism for learning and mutual support, but it also reveals the problematic 'darker' side of networks, highlighting how some individuals and schools have better opportunities to access and benefit from networks than others, as well as the ethical dilemmas that leaders can face as they engage in net-work. I refer to the vignette at times in the following sections, although the analysis is derived from a wider review of evidence as well as my own experience and work.

Vignette – The SUCCESS Alliance (England)

The SUCCESS Alliance was formed by six primary schools, all based in one town in England. The town has 12 primary schools in total and, in years gone by, the headteachers of all 12 schools met regularly and worked together as a local cluster. However, the decision to form the breakaway SUCCESS Alliance caused tension and a breakdown in town-wide collaboration.

The leaders of the six schools decided to form SUCCESS in the years after 2010, when the formerly strong Local Authority (LA) had reduced capacity to support schools as a result of budget cuts, while England's national government was encouraging schools to collaborate in 'self-improving' partnerships. The six SUCCESS founders 'felt we couldn't wait. The world was changing around us, and if we didn't do something, we'd be left on our own.' They proposed introducing peer reviews between schools – whereby each school would be visited by leaders from two other schools each year to review an identified area of practice. The SUCCESS headteachers argued that this would avoid complacency and help them to prepare for formal inspections by Ofsted, England's inspectorate. The other six cluster headteachers resisted the proposal, but the proposing group decided to go ahead nonetheless. Building on the peer reviews, the SUCCESS schools have since formalised the partnership and developed a range of other collaborative practices, such as subject networks for teachers in different curriculum areas, and jointly run professional and leadership development programmes for staff.

One SUCCESS headteacher explained that the network's effectiveness reflects the professional confidence of, and mutual trust between, the six founding headteachers. They are all prepared to open up their schools and ask each other challenging questions: 'we all viewed each other as equals. If I'm honest, we're fairly arrogant, strident characters who believe we're right'.

However, the formation of SUCCESS as a breakaway partnership led to a division between what one headteacher described as the 'stronger' and 'more vulnerable' schools in the former cluster. He explained that 'there's a lot more suspicion than… in the past. The temperature drops by about 30 degrees as soon as you mention SUCCESS'. This headteacher

admitted to feeling deeply conflicted by this development, but argued that his decision to join SUCCESS was the only option in the context of the government's policy framework:

'I think it's a capitalist model. It's about school-to-school competition, and the government's very hot on that, and for that, there are winners and losers. And right now, I've taken the pragmatic, yet morally dubious position of 'I want to be with the winners', and that means I have to leave out some losers, some people who are vulnerable, on the outside. And we know that they're there. We know that they'd bite our arm off to come and join us. But we can't have lots of voices in the room if we're going to move things on quickly. And that's not fair'.

3. Networks around the world

This section draws on published evidence to give a very brief overview of where and how network policies have developed globally. This evidence is undoubtedly more extensive in the global North, but an exploration of articles from China and south-east Asia indicates that networks are also widespread – if distinctive – there too.

Révai (2020:8) reports that 'more and more countries have been investing in establishing networks in education as forms of organisation to facilitate change' and draws together vignettes from different countries, including Hungary, the Netherlands and France, as well a Europe-wide online network, to illustrate this claim. In a similar vein, Rincon-Gallardo and Fullan (2016) review examples from Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada, Columbia, England, Mexico and the USA. Paniagua and Istance (2018) set out to identify and survey educational networks globally and include examples from Canada, Europe, South America, and Japan, which they categorise into three broad, non-exclusive groups, reflecting the dominant focus of their activity:

- pedagogical approach networks – includes networks implementing the same innovations and defined by common pedagogical principles
- innovation promotion networks – networks that share their different innovative pedagogies
- professional learning networks – focused on providing professional development to schools and teachers.

These and equivalent reviews (e.g. Brown, 2020; Penuel and Gallagher 2017; Sartory et al. 2017; Mintrop 2016; Bryk 2015; and Suggett, 2014) suggest that networking policies and practices are developing most clearly in Anglo-Saxon, European, and Latin American contexts. However, the fact that most published evidence is weighted towards these contexts does not mean that educational networks are not a feature of policy and practice in other parts of the world. Indeed, a focused search for research published in English from China and south-east Asia finds evidence that many – perhaps most – schools in these contexts also engage in networks (Qian and Walker 2019; Harris, Zhao and Caldwell 2009; Wu, Chan and Forrestor 2005). For example, Walker and Qian (2020:13) interviewed 101

primary school principals from across different parts of China and report a 'widely-adopted policy of forming school networks or consortiums which allowed principals to share or seek resources from partner schools.' However, the research also highlights important differences as well as similarities in both leadership and networking when compared with findings from Western contexts, as a result of contextual and cultural differences (Hallinger 2018). For example, Hallinger and Walker (2017:139) review accumulated findings on principal instructional leadership in five East Asian contexts (China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam), and conclude that despite continuing efforts to "decentralize authority," "involve teachers in decision making," "empower teachers" and create cadres of "middle-level leaders", 'educational change and school improvement remain largely top-down enterprises' in these societies. These differences also influence the role and nature of networking for school principals. Such networking is certainly important, but it is more clearly focused on maintaining strong relations with government and/or party officials than might be the case in most Western contexts.

4. Understanding networks: seven core features

This section sets out seven core features of networks that leaders must consider, and also highlights common barriers to network development. The evidence to support these core features comes from my own work with various collaborators (Greany and Kamp, 2022; Greany 2020a; Greany 2018a; Greany and Higham 2018; Greany and McGinity 2021; Greany and Maxwell 2017; Greany and Allen 2014) as well as the wider empirical and theoretical studies cited.

Firstly, successful inter-organizational networks and partnerships generally reflect a shared goal or interest. In education, the partnerships that have the greatest discernible impact tend to focus on addressing shared and reasonably specific collaborative priorities around improving teachers' practice and/or enhancing outcomes for specific groups of students or curriculum areas. However, in practice, individuals and organizations can have multiple motivations for engaging in networks, so the stated goal might not reflect the full picture. For example, Kadushin (2012) identifies three intrinsic needs which lead individuals to engage in networks: i) s*afety* – the desire for social support in dense, cohesive networks; ii) *effectiveness* – leading us to reach out beyond our current situation and comfort zone, in the process making connections across diverse networks; iii) s*tatus* – or 'keeping up with the Joneses', by accessing asymmetric networks which can advance our rank and level of social capital. Clearly, organizations are not the same as individuals, but the point is that network motives and goals are frequently multi-dimensional and one need (e.g. for safety) can be in tension with another (e.g. for effectiveness).

Second, network impact relates to the level of commitment and contribution – the investment – of network members. Such commitment requires a degree of shared ownership over decision-making, and therefore power, so that the contribution and expertise of different partners is equally valued regardless of their 'usual' positional role, and a sense that benefits are shared equally. However, as we saw in the case of the

SUCCESS Alliance vignette, a school's ability to commit to these networking processes will vary, reflecting issues such as size, socio-economic status and/or remoteness, and can wax and wane in line with its internal capacity, leadership commitment and external factors.

Third, successful networks generally share values, practices and attributes, such as solidarity, honesty, reciprocity, and trust, which take time to build. Two points are important here: first, people with like characteristics tend to be connected (*homophily*, or 'birds of a feather') and this is often true of organizations (for example, in the vignette the SUCCESS headteachers are described as 'arrogant, strident characters', while their schools are described as 'stronger'); second, the process of collaboration involves mutual influence (feedback), leading to a level of convergence in norms and behaviours over time (*isomorphism*). The circumstances of network formation, for example whether or not schools are mandated to join a particular group, influences the development of these share values, practices and attributes and their existence cannot be taken for granted. Furthermore, the exact nature and influence of these features on network functioning is not clear cut. For example, Hargreaves (2010) argues that 'deep' partnerships require strong ties between staff at multiple levels across schools, with close and frequent interactions and high levels of relational trust and reciprocity. Yet research outside education has shown that strong ties in relatively closed networks can actually limit opportunities, whereas weak ties across distributed networks can allow new information to flow and problems to be innovatively solved even in the absence of high levels of trust (Wellman 1983; Granovetter 1973).

Fourth, inter-organizational partnerships are embedded within wider societal contexts and interact with the multiple social networks that operate within and, often, across the organizations involved. These social networks might be more and/or less formalized; for example, a partnership might decide to convene a formal network for subject leaders from each school, but a subset of these same subject leaders might also meet informally outside work, potentially forming a clique. Organizational roles are also important: for example, the nature and content of networks involving school principals can be very different to networks involving classroom teachers.

The fifth feature of networks is that many develop formalized governance and management structures over time as they grow, believing this will improve efficiency. However, such structures can risk reducing levels of ownership for (some) members. Pino-Yancovic et al. (2020) suggest that networks exist on a spectrum – from loose 'association', to 'emerging collaboration' focused on addressing short term tasks, to 'sustained collaboration' and, finally, 'collegiality' characterized by shared vision and values – with different formations serving different purposes and the potential to move from one model to another over time.

Sixth, research indicates a number of design principles or features that are important for network effectiveness. In addition to the points above around shared goals and values, these include more specific aspects such as the availability of resources (including allocated time for network participation) and the use of shared protocols and routines that guide

action and support impact, without pushing the network towards rule-following (McCarthy, Miller and Skidmore 2004; Hargreaves, Parsley and Cox 2015). One way to assess networks is to view them through four dimensions – structure, function, strength and content (Perry, Pescosolido and Borgatti 2020) – which interact to influence individual and network-level outcomes and behaviours. *Structure* reflects the architecture of the network, including the presence and patterns of linkages between members. *Function* relates to the types of exchanges, services or supports made accessible through the network. *Strength* captures the intensity and duration of bonds between network members. *Content* refers to what flows to or from network members, which might include more tangible aspects, such as information, knowledge, money, skills, or less tangible cultural aspects, such as attitudes, opinions and beliefs.

Seventh, networks in education are frequently focused on generating new knowledge (*exploration*) and diffusing innovations across schools (*exploitation*), but doing this successfully requires sophisticated skills backed by supportive processes. Research on knowledge sharing (Hartley and Benington 2006; Fielding et al. 2004) indicates that knowledge is not simply 'transferred' from one context to another, but rather continuously reviewed and transformed as it is taken into different settings, although the extent to which such knowledge benefits from formal codification or not is debated (Glazer and Peurach, 2015; Holmqvist 2003). Many networks adopt cycles of collaborative enquiry (such as action research, research and development, learning and change networks, networked improvement communities etc.), informed by collective reflection on evidence and data and, sometimes, common quality frameworks, as a means of cumulatively building and sharing practice (Greany and Maxwell 2017; Brown and Poortmen 2018; Bryk 2015).

These features are not intended to be exhaustive. For example, Muijs et al. (2011) develop a typology of networks which considers additional issues, such as the time frames involved and the geographic spread of network members. I agree that these issues are important but have kept to seven significant features here for the sake of parsimony.

Finally, there is evidence on common barriers to networks in education, although the nature and impact of these is context specific and it is clear that addressing the features above can help to overcome these barriers. Paniagua and Istance (2018) identify barriers that include: complacency and a lack of commitment from network members; the loss of central funding when policy priorities changed; lack of time; competition between schools; and overly tight accountability requirements that hinder innovation. Similarly, Armstrong, Brown and Chapman (2020:16) summarized the most common barriers in England in terms of: 'threats to school autonomy (and perceived power imbalances), capacity (including funding and resources), (staff) workload and a marketized national policy context that fosters and actively encourages competition.'

5. Leadership within and across networks

The seven core features outlined in the last section all point towards the need for sophisticated leadership if networks are to form and operate successfully and to overcome

the various barriers identified. Popp et al. (2015:33) argue that network leaders must nurture a culture that ‘addresses competing interests, politics and power differentials; and that promotes trusting relationships, curiosity, conscious interest in gaining different perspectives, and respect for diversity of views among organizations.’ This sophistication is certainly required from lead facilitators in networks but can equally be seen to apply to wider participants, reflecting the fact that networks invariably involve distributed and hybrid forms of leadership. However, this section argues that research and thinking in education has been unhelpfully dominated by a focus on leadership, management and effectiveness within single organisations. It suggests that leading a single school is not generally a good preparation for leading across a network. It recognises that thinking and practice have broadened out in recent years and explores how these developments can enrich our understanding of network leadership. Finally, it identifies three approaches which appear central to successful network leadership in education: working productively with tensions and paradox, collective sensemaking, and adopting an ecological approach.

A transnational leadership package

Despite the growing importance of networks for educational reform efforts around the world, outlined in section three, the implications of this have barely permeated mainstream policy and practice on school leadership and management. Instead, Thomson, Gunter and Blackmore (2021: x-xi) argue that the educational leadership industry has evolved to see only ‘one-best way to do leading and leadership and to be a leader’. This transnational leadership package (TLP) derives from diverse traditions, including Taylorist principles of scientific management, the human relations movement, the contemporary focus on quantitative evidence and data-driven decisions, and, sometimes, more socially critical perspectives. These paradigms have converged with a neoliberal reform agenda underpinned by the principles of NPM. From this convergence, preferred models of leadership have been articulated. While some ‘tactical and pragmatic’ mediations do occur at the local level, for the most part the paradigms of educational leadership, management and administration ‘inform and communicate vision and mission for localised implementation’. ‘Good’ leadership thus becomes normalized in particular ways, as does the development of leadership training, standards for leadership and principal certification.

The TLP reflects a coalescing of research and thinking in relation to school leadership within individual schools in recent decades, informed by a series of systematic and meta-reviews which synthesise empirical research in this area (Robinson and Gray 2019; Liebowitz and Porter 2019; Hitt and Tucker 2016; Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd 2009). One influential example is Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins’ (2020) update to their 2008 article *Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership* (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008). The authors confirm their earlier analysis which suggested that all school leaders draw on the same ‘repertoire’ of leadership practices across four domains: setting directions, building relationships and developing people, redesigning the organization to support desired practices, and improving the instructional program. Within the 21 specific practices set out

within these four domains, only three speak to the kinds of practice arguably required for educational networks, and only the third of these is genuinely outward looking: first, build a collaborative culture and distribute leadership; second, structure the organization to facilitate collaboration; third, connect the school to its wider environment (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2020).

Distributed and system leadership

Thus it seems that 'good' school leadership has come to be associated with a relentless internal organisational and instructional focus on improving measured student achievement and attainment (Earley, 2021). However, a career spent climbing through various organisational roles, while implementing evidence-based changes in pursuit of improved pupil outcomes, may not be the best preparation for leadership across a lateral network in which decision-making is collective and success can rarely be measured in straightforward ways. Of course, there are overlaps between leading successfully within a school and leading across a network: both contexts require integrity, the ability to communicate well, to think strategically and to facilitate group decision-making and commitment, although if anything these qualities become even more essential for leaders who cannot rely on positional authority (Hill 2008).[1] Furthermore, two concepts have emerged within the mainstream educational leadership literature in recent years which are helpful as we consider network leadership.

The first is distributed leadership (Spillane 2006), which has developed – alongside transformational and instructional leadership (Marks and Printy 2003; Gumus et al. 2018) – as one of the core models for educational leadership within schools (Bush 2019). From the 1990s, Pearce and Conger argue, 'conditions were finally right for the acceptance of [distributed leadership's] seemingly radical departure from the traditional view of leadership as something imparted to followers by a leader from above' (2003: 13). Distributed leadership allows us to understand leadership as a collective, rather than individual, property – an idea that is key to understanding leadership in networks. Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2020) argue that leadership within schools has greater impact when it is distributed because this facilitates greater ownership of improvement efforts across teams and allows for diverse forms of expertise to be drawn upon.

Distributed leadership has not been lacking in critique (Lumby 2018; Harris 2013), but it remains a helpful concept as we assess network leadership. Peter Gronn (2002) was an early proponent, arguing that distributed leadership offered the potential to recognize important dimensions of leadership which so often go unrecognized in the mainstream literature, such as distributed cognition, reciprocal influence, diffusion of leadership and power, and conjoint agency. However, more recently, Gronn (2016: 172) has come to

[1] By the same token, it could be argued that the three leadership practices outlined here as significant for leadership across networks (i.e. working productively with tensions and paradox, collective sensemaking, and adopting an ecological approach) are also – increasingly – important for successful leadership within schools, as schools are asked to respond to ever more complex challenges and needs.

suggest that distributed leadership 'has lost the analytical gloss that once it may have had'. Instead, he sets out a persuasive argument for leadership configurations as hybrid, always existing on a set of continua (i.e. individualism and collectivism, informal and formal, emergent and designed) in ways which change over time and in response to contextual demands. This notion of hybrid leadership has also been applied to network leadership; for example, Townsend (2015) helpfully argues against seeing network leadership as a set of binary alternatives, suggesting instead that it requires the ability to combine collective and individual activity, knowledge generation and knowledge transfer, emergent and designed features, and so on.

Higham, Hopkins and Matthews (2009: 66) position distributed leadership is one of a triad of leadership concepts required for collaborative capacity-building across networks. Leadership of learning sits at the base of their model, while distributed leadership sits above this and focuses on developing and empowering 'a wider cadre of staff to act and think more strategically'. System leadership then sits above distributed leadership, enabling networks that reach beyond individual institutions. Other writers have similarly argued that system leadership is required to move beyond the dominant, single organisation models. For example, writing in 2005, Michael Fullan analysed the achievements of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in England, noting that while there were initial lifts in pupil achievement, these soon plateaued. According to Fullan, teachers and principals did not 'own' the strategy and this had an impact on innovation, accounting for the inability to sustain progress over time. Instead, Fullan argued that system reform requires a focus on adaptive challenges, systems thinking and system leadership.

Hopkins and Higham (2007) argue that system leaders in education are those individuals who invest in the improvement of both their own, and other, schools. However, system leadership remains a slippery concept, made more complex given 'system' can reference an array of concepts: an education system, a local authority system, or a network of schools (Harris, Jones, and Hashim 2021). A number of jurisdictions have developed an overt systemic focus to leadership, which Harris et al. (2021) review, identifying three distinctive but interrelated interpretations of the concept in practice. First, as evidenced in Singapore, system leadership *as* system change. Here, leaders within the system and its sub-systems collectively operate as system change agents. Second, as evidenced in England, system leadership, where designated leaders of education are responsible *for* system change. Third, system leadership *through* system change. Here, Ontario is offered as an example where system change results in the emergence of system leaders.

England's model of system leadership – in particular the government's approach to designating National Leaders of Education who then work with their teams to support under-performing schools – has been evaluated most comprehensively (Armstrong et al. 2020). Early assessments of impact were largely positive (Pont and Hopkins 2008; Muijs 2015) and David Hargreaves (2010) argued that system leadership would be fundamental to the development of a successful 'self-improving' school system in England. However, research has also highlighted significant issues with the concept as it has become tied into

England's wider reform framework. For example, Greany and Higham (2018) characterize system leaders as a 'co-opted elite', while Cousin (2019:19) shows them as 'part of the increasingly networked, complex governance system', holding degrees of power as a result of their credibility in leading successful schools, but nevertheless acting as agents of a new order that is ever more centralized and demanding in its NPM-driven accountability and performance expectations. Cousin's longitudinal approach allows her to identify the ways in which this co-optation occurs, showing how her case study leaders became less distributed and more directive in their approach as the system's demands on them ramped up, and how the language of 'moral purpose' gradually falls out of their personal narratives.

Based on their review of evidence, Harris et al. (2021) propose four observations to realize the potential of system leadership. First, seniority or years of experience within education cannot be the main criterion for recruitment and selection to formal system leader roles. Second, leaders within a system cannot be assumed to be system leaders. Third, system leaders need to have the status, recognition and skills to lead both 'thought' and 'practical' work. This might suggest, in connection to Fullan's (2004) argument detailed above, that such leaders work with *both* adaptive challenges and technical solutions. Fourth, these leaders must hold a theory of action and the ability to model 'next practice' rather than 'existing or best practice', adding value to the system itself. In David Hargreaves' (2012) term, these system leaders must be 'analytic investigators.'

Distributed and system leadership thus provide helpful – although imperfect - tools to conceptualise leadership across inter-school networks. Distributed leadership allows us to see leadership as a collective, shared endeavour, with all the complexity that comes with a move away from individual, positional roles. System leadership helps to us move beyond the focus on individual schools and to see leadership as focussed on addressing systemic and collective issues and priorities. Equally, as noted above, many aspects of leadership within schools remain relevant and necessary for leadership across networks.

Leading networks: three core capabilities

Building on these insights, Annelies Kamp and I (Greany and Kamp, 2022) identify three core aspects of network leadership: working productively with tensions and paradox, collective sensemaking, and adopting an ecological approach. These core aspects are derived from our reading of the network leadership literature combined with our research into inter-school networks across four countries (Chile, England, New Zealand and Singapore) and through four distinct theoretical lenses (school improvement and effectiveness, governance theory, complexity theory, and actor-network theory). Our analysis seeks to recognise why the Transnational Leadership Package focus on intra-organisational leadership has become so dominant - contemporary school leaders should, rightly, attend to the educational improvement needs of their own schools and the children they are directly responsible for. However, we show that this inward focus need not prevent leaders from also facing outwards, engaging productively in networks which can enrich their own school's journey and, potentially, help to address complex cross-cutting issues that

individual schools can solve on their own. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented numerous examples of such complex, cross-cutting issues as well as instances of schools collaborating in networks to address them (Greany et al. 2021).

The first of these capabilities is an ability to work productively with paradox. Paradox 'denotes contradictory yet interrelated elements … [which] seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously' (Lewis 2000: 760). Various observers have noted the tensions and paradoxes that lie at the heart of many networks, particularly where they are funded by government. For example, networks can face demands for measurable 'results' within set timeframes, despite the reality that relationship-building takes time and that network outcomes can be hard to measure. Embracing paradox involves a recognition that leaders can respond to system complexities without needing to fully resolve conflicts to the point of nonexistence (Bowers 2017: 45-6). O'Reilly and Reed (2011) suggest that taking up the lens of paradox allows leaders to adopt an and/and approach, rather than assuming what is good for one network member must always be at the cost of another.

The second theme is collective sensemaking. This is arguably key to how network leaders work productively with paradox to acknowledge the ambiguities involved while also learning, collectively, how best to move forward. The importance of sensemaking was first propounded by the organizational theorist Karl Weick. Bauer (2019: 119–121) explains that Weick eschews 'the noun *organization*, in favour of the more active *organizing',* his point being that 'the world – including both organizations and their environments – are being constantly enacted by individuals and groups'*.* It is straightforward to see how this can apply to networks and *networking* as much as organizations and *organizing*. Within Weick's work, sensemaking is a rich concept that has been interpreted in different ways (Johnson and Kruse 2019; Eddy-Spicer 2019), but a core feature is that it involves an interaction of activity and interpretation. This suggests that 'meaning is apt to *follow* action, and that ambiguity can never be eliminated entirely (or, by extension, our predictions cannot help but be fraught with uncertainty)' (Bauer 2019: 129). Furthermore, organizing – and, arguably, networking – emerges in communication. Or as Bauer (2019: 133) puts it 'what leaders lead is the sharing of knowledge, ideas, and perspectives… Leading is a *social process of learning together'*. In Weick's words, leaders are poets who speculate, ask questions, follow hunches and 'talk airy nothing into being' (Weick 2011: 9), but they do this collectively, thereby generating shared meaning. Sensemaking thus has similarities with Steve Munby's (2021) concept of invitational leadership, part of which involves generating 'a misty vision' and then inviting others to shape the thinking, including through collective reflection on actions and events that have already taken place.

The third concept is eco-leadership, in which the leader 'looks both ways: internally at the organizational network and externally at wider ecosystems (social, technology, and nature)' (Western 2019: 309). Leading an ecosystem certainly requires 'big picture' meta-analytical thinking, which sees how the individual school is nested within a wider system of actors, all of which can impact on the lives, well-being and learning of children, families and

communities. In addition, eco-leadership recognises the need for innovation, through a 'radical' distribution of leadership, committing to 'a long-term agenda of enrolling, including and enabling other players with an interest in learning in the work of schools, and incorporating other learning modalities in a much more central way – in short, becoming 'open'' (Hallgarten, Hannon and Beresford 2015: 50). Eco-leadership is thus, of necessity, focused on ethics and underpinning values. Rupert Higham (2021) argues that existing approaches to leadership reflect underpinning assumptions (for example, that adults have the moral right and/or duty to pass on their ethical codes to children) which no longer hold true in today's world, given that we are faced with catastrophic threats to our climate, economies and democracies. On this basis, Higham argues for ethical leadership which recognises and fosters the role of young people as partners and leaders in change. Toh et al. (2014: 836) analyse leadership in Singapore through the lens of eco-systems, showing how these school leaders 'can forge ecological coherence… for the collective good' by operating as 'fluent implementers, communicators of vision and contextually astute mediators who were able to manage the multiple tensions of policy and teacher enactments on the ground level' (ibid).

Working productively with tensions and paradox, collective sensemaking, and adopting an ecological approach appear central for the leadership of successful networks. It is hopefully clear to see how these three capabilities – when combined with the core aspects of wider leadership already referenced - can enable leaders to work nimbly to respond to the seven core features of networks outlined in the previous section. It is also possible to see how these forms of leadership could help overcome the problematic issues raised by the vignette: rather than simply jumping in with the 'winners' in the SUCCESS Alliance, but then feeling deeply conflicted by his 'morally dubious position', if our interviewee had been equipped with these capabilities he might have been able to navigate the tensions in the former cluster and facilitate a more clearly values and place-based solution which met the needs of all children and families across the town.

6. Conclusion and suggestions for future development

Grimaldi (2011:121) argues that networks have been presented as 'magical concepts' – or panaceas – in education, promising 'modernity, neutrality, pragmatism and positivity.' In contrast, this chapter has sought to acknowledge the complexities involved and to recognise the 'dark side' of networking, which can actually serve to accentuate rather than ameliorate inequalities in school systems. The chapter acknowledges that successful leadership in these contexts is multi-faceted, adaptive and contingent, making clear that there is no one 'right' way to lead networks (Heifetz 1994). The paradoxes involved mean that there will always be trade-offs and hard choices to make, so leadership in these contexts can feel messy and unsatisfactory, with a need for pragmatism and 'collaborative thuggery' (Vangen and Huxham 2003) in order to move the agenda forward, even while aspiring to the lofty ideals of eco-leadership sketched out above. Critically, because network

leadership is not the purview of a single leader in a formal leadership position, these dilemmas are inherently shared and addressed collectively, through sensemaking.

To conclude, I see two areas for future development, certainly in relation to policy and practice, but also for research:

- Firstly, we must challenge the dominant focus on leadership *within* schools, which permeates the Transnational Leadership Package. This internal focus risks reducing leadership to a narrow, technical activity, geared towards improving pupil test scores. Children's learning and growth in the 21st Century requires a more holistic view which recognises the value of schools but sees them as embedded within wider networks and social and technological systems. From this, it follows that school leaders need the kinds of capabilities and development opportunities that will enable them to lead successfully both internally and externally, across inclusive and equitable networks.
- Secondly, in section two, above, I set out the trend towards decentralisation and centralisation in school systems world-wide and highlighted how this is impacting on traditional hierarchical 'middle tier' bodies, such as local authorities and school districts. I argued that school-to-school networks offer a means of overcoming competition and fragmentation in these contexts. However, the SUCCESS Alliance vignette serves to highlight how these developments can be problematic, placing an arguably unfair level of responsibility on school-level leaders to think and act systemically and inclusively. The outcome – in the case of the SUCCESS Alliance – appears to be a more unequal system, with the town's six 'more vulnerable' schools left out of the network, unable to access the support and professional learning it offers. For this reason, I argue that more work is needed to understand what kinds of structures, roles and capabilities are required at the 'middle tier' level, as well as in schools, in order to maximise the potential of networks that support equity.

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[i] Rincon-Gallardo and Fullan (2016:6) distinguish between networks as 'a set of people or organizations and the direct and indirect connections that exist among them', and collaboration as 'the act of working together with a common purpose'. Provan and Kenis' focus on goal-directed networks addresses this distinction.