



National College for  
Teaching & Leadership

# **Three greats for a self- improving school system: pedagogy, professional development and leadership: executive summary**

**Teaching schools R&D network national  
themes project 2012-14**

**Research Report**

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# Contents

Contents	2
List of figures	2
R&D national themes project in context	3
Introduction	3
Project context and origins	3
Learning from across the projects	4
Theme one: what makes great pedagogy?	4
Theme two: what makes great professional development which leads to consistently great pedagogy?	4
Theme three: how can leaders lead successful TSAs enabling great pedagogy	5
Ten common messages	6
An essential triad	8
What has been learnt about collaborative R&D?	9
Collaborative R&D across a self-improving school system	12
Questions for dialogue	14
Questions for teaching school and other alliance leaders	14
Questions for policymakers	14
Questions for universities and other research partners	15
References	16

## List of figures

Figure 1: Three greats: an essential triad .....	8
Figure 2: Collaborative R&D across a self-improving school system .....	13

# R&D national themes project in context

## Introduction

Over two-and-a-half years, teaching school alliances (TSAs) across England involved in the National College for Teaching and Leadership's (NCTL) research and development (R&D) network have engaged in collaborative R&D projects investigating three themes:

- Theme one: what makes great pedagogy?
- Theme two: what makes great professional development which leads to consistently great pedagogy?
- Theme three: how can leaders lead successful TSAs which enable the development of consistently great pedagogy?

The alliances were supported by two national teams. The partners for themes 1 and 2 were University College London Institute of Education and Sheffield Hallam University. Theme 3's partners were the Isos Partnership, with Robert Hill and Professor Qing Gu of the University of Nottingham. This summary of a larger report (Stoll, 2015) looks across the projects, national teams' reports (Nelson et al, 2015a; Rea et al, 2015a; Maxwell, Greany et al, 2015) and case studies (Nelson et al, 2015b, 2015c; Rea et al, 2015b), published at the same time. It synthesises messages from their experiences and findings, then poses questions for schools, policy makers and research partners.

## Project context and origins

These projects have taken place in a national policy context that is committed to evidence-based teaching in an autonomous and diverse but connected self-improving school system. Teaching schools, as system leaders, are leading the way. Improving the quality of teaching is central to both national and international agendas. Furthering the white paper *The Importance of Teaching* (Department for Education, 2010) and reports such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) call for 'teachers to be high-level knowledge workers' (Schleicher, 2012), the thrust is towards developing teaching as an evidence-based profession. Schools are increasingly expected to use evidence when selecting, implementing and evaluating their improvement efforts. Innovation is also increasingly encouraged, but this must be purposeful and disciplined (Hargreaves, 2011).

R&D is one of teaching schools' six responsibilities ('the big six'). The NCTL's national R&D network proposed the three themes as overarching network research priorities. NCTL funded 98 teaching schools to enable them to undertake collaborative R&D in their alliance within one of the themes, with one third focusing on each theme. The aim was to produce robust evidence to disseminate more widely, whilst building the capacity and commitment of teaching schools in their use of R&D approaches and evidence.

## Learning from across the projects

### Theme one: what makes great pedagogy?

At the core of all three themes is the need to ensure great pedagogy. Pedagogy is not just teaching. It consists of the theories, values, evidence and justifications that underpin teaching: what you need to know, and the skills needed at your fingertips, to make and justify the many different decisions that teaching requires (Alexander, 2004). Drawing on an initial literature review on 'what's known' about great pedagogy (Husbands and Pearce, 2012) and their baseline picture, 33 TSAs used an enquiry cycle methodology (Harris and Jones, 2011, 2012) to design and carry out projects tackling many aspects of pedagogy.

Looking across their findings the national team came up with 14 key messages about what makes great pedagogy, summarised under these seven headings.

#### Key messages about what makes great pedagogy

1. Talk with pupils about their learning, listen carefully, and involve them
2. Be open to new learning and challenge and don't give up
3. Use a range of strategies flexibly to meet pupils' needs
4. Develop pupils' thinking and learning skills
5. Don't underestimate what pupils already know and can do
6. Build in time for assessment for learning (AfL) and scaffold it
7. Develop a common language to talk to colleagues about pedagogy

Nelson et al (2015a)

### Theme two: what makes great professional development which leads to consistently great pedagogy?

This theme focuses on exploring and stimulating high quality professional development that will lead to consistently great pedagogy within and across schools. Great teaching has a positive impact on pupils' learning experiences and outcomes and great professional development that leads to consistently great pedagogy also leads to improved pupil learning, achievement and wellbeing (Timperley, 2011).

The 33 participating TSAs' project focus areas drew on a research literature review on 'what's known' about great professional development which leads to consistently great pedagogy (Stoll et al, 2012). Having established a baseline picture they used the same enquiry cycle methodology as theme 1 to develop and implement their projects.

Looking across their findings the national team generated 16 key messages about what makes great professional development which leads to great pedagogy, summarised under these six headings.

### **Key messages about great professional development**

1. Think about the pupils' needs and the impact you want to have
2. Help colleagues to think seriously and differently about their practice
3. Provide opportunities for colleagues to engage in deep collaborative learning
4. Ensure access to knowledge and skills from inside and outside
5. Use collaborative enquiry to stimulate professional learning – but not as a quick fix
6. Facilitate the practicalities to encourage a learning culture

Nelson et al, (2015a)

## **Theme three: how can leaders lead successful TSAs enabling great pedagogy**

The third theme is leadership. When the project started, there was relatively limited knowledge about leadership for learning and development in school-to school networks which assesses their influence and impact. The 32 TSAs exploring and intervening in aspects of this theme drew on Hargreaves's (2011; 2012) self-improving school system maturity matrix and an initial literature review (Gu et al, 2012). After establishing a baseline, they designed, tested, reviewed and refined interventions, using an enquiry and intervention cycle.

From their analysis of the TSAs' evidence, the national team developed 13 key messages which articulate 'firm findings' around three aspects of leadership: leadership of cross-school pedagogy projects, leadership to develop pedagogy within a school, and leadership of great pedagogy at alliance level.

## **Key messages about leadership – firm findings**

### **1) Leadership of cross-school pedagogy projects:**

1. Select appropriate projects
2. Engage schools (and their headteachers)
3. Scope and plan
4. Exercise flexibility
5. Empower middle leaders

### **2) Leadership within schools of pedagogy projects (related to cross-school pedagogy projects and programmes):**

6. Ensure headteacher sponsorship
7. Designate senior leader champions
8. Focus on development

### **3) Leadership of great pedagogy at alliance level:**

9. Work to clear strategic priorities
10. Draw on skills differently
11. Align activity
12. Build trust and it will deepen and extend impact
13. Manage risks

Rea et al (2015a)

## **Ten common messages**

The relationship between the three themes is striking. Looking at project titles and questions, it is often hard to determine which theme was the focus. The themes' findings contain 10 transversal messages about ensuring great pedagogy and the professional development and leadership to develop and embed it within and across alliances.

**1. Be clear about the difference you want to make** - Being clear about pupils' starting points is essential for evaluating the impact of teaching. Having this baseline

picture helps provide the focus for professional development. Project leaders also need to capture a baseline picture, then assess and ensure impact.

**2. Engage interest and commitment – involve others and distribute leadership** - Successful pedagogy takes account of pupils' experiences of learning and involves them in planning and teaching, which increases their engagement. Professional development is more fruitful when teachers quickly gain ownership of projects. Middle leaders also need to be able to co-construct and steer projects.

**3. Talk about learning to build trusting relationships** - Taking account of what pupils have to say about learning helps develop positive relationships with them. Deep quality talk between teachers nourishes professional relationships and leads to deep learning. Dialogue, co-constructing new knowledge and practice and reflection are success ingredients for alliance leaders.

**4. Embrace and persist with challenge** - Leaders need persistence and resilience to get colleagues on board and manage risks. Collaborative R&D throws up issues that require teachers to rethink their practice. It is tough having beliefs challenged. Teachers have to keep motivated and stay resilient. They also have to believe in their own capacity to grow and improve.

**5. Support peers' learning and growth** - Peers can be valuable mentors or coaches. Using scaffolding in AfL helps to activate pupils as learning mentors for their peers. Collaborating with peers helps teachers think more critically about their practice, and middle leaders can grow and develop through supporting groups of colleagues.

**6. Be flexible and adaptable** - Excellent teachers adapt topics and strategies as the situation changes. They are not fixed in their approach and open to learning. Professional learning must adapt over time to address changing needs of teachers. Similarly, leaders have to 'flex' projects to respond to different school contexts, needs and development stages.

**7. Emphasise development over judgement** - Well-designed assessment for learning (AfL) offers pupils feedback that has a significant impact and learning can be powerful when leaders take a non-judgmental approach to designing teacher-to-teacher development activities. External accountability can hold leaders and teachers back from engaging in collaborative R&D. Focusing on development inspires as well as reassures.

**8. Take and make time** - Bringing about deep change does not happen overnight. Pupils and teachers need time to internalise feedback and incorporate it into improved learning behaviours and teaching practices. Headteachers have to invest

the time for teachers and middle leaders to get to know each other's schools, design, participate in and evaluate projects, and reflect on their learning.

**9. Draw on external expertise – don't go it alone** - Developing excellent pedagogy is enriched by outside expertise, from teachers and school leaders at other schools, external facilitators, subject specialists, researchers and other strategic partners. Independent experts can provide support at different stages, specialist knowledge and skills, and help keep processes on track.

**10. Work towards cultural change and sustainability** - Seeing the prime goal as wide culture and behaviour change is fundamental to ensuring the ultimate sustainability of collaborative projects. Specific interventions or initiatives are critical to improving practice, but leaders need to create a culture that is curious, research-oriented, and open to learning and feedback from others.

## **An essential triad**

In TSAs or other partnerships, pedagogy, professional development and leadership within and across alliances go hand-in-hand (see figure 1). They cannot be separated – they are mutually influential and interdependent. Pedagogy is at the core and the leadership and professional development are there to ensure that pedagogy is great. But great pedagogy also challenges and inspires leadership and professional development to new heights. Project evidence not only supports prior research findings; it complements, enriches and contextualises these findings as practitioners engage with and co-construct meaningful interventions which they then test out to produce their own findings.

Figure 1: Three greats: an essential triad



## What has been learnt about collaborative R&D?

### Collaborative R&D across alliances – enquiry and innovation

- Elements of collaborative R&D across an alliance that lead to successful outcomes include repeated cycles of enquiry and innovation, with regular reflection with peers and facilitators on progress, successes and challenges. This leads to refinements, enhancements and new elements to increase chances of success.
- Forms of collaborative R&D range from those totally co-created, through ones with a common theme across all schools but individual focus areas, to discrete projects with collaborative elements. Such decisions depend on school and alliance needs, development stage, relationships, and delegation of leadership.
- Participating in collaborative R&D can be energising, motivational and developmental for those involved. It can build trust and relationships where colleagues can engage in deep conversation about teaching and learning and are not afraid to challenge each other's practice. Persistence and commitment are important. Teachers need to be involved at an early stage in decisions, helping to construct the projects, and taking the lead as they are ready.

## Research, other evidence and tools

- Connecting practitioner enquiry in collaborative R&D with what is known from research about the project focus and the overall theme helps enrich understanding, provides helpful leads and provides insights that led to creative interventions.
- Other evidence about successful interventions and tools that can aid decision making, monitoring of progress and reflection on learning, deepens and enriches projects, thinking and ability to articulate reasons for successes and challenges.

## External support

- External facilitation and support helps provide structure and challenge, and offers additional capacity and access to new knowledge. Universities and other researchers can provide guidance on how to maintain rigour of enquiry, enable access to relevant research materials and provide advice on ethical issues.

## Peer-to-peer challenge, support and learning

- Critical friendship and challenge is essential to successful collaborative R&D. Cross-alliance links between peers sharpens thinking, provides further options and can help create the regional and national connections that are more likely to promote system-wide change.

## Leadership

- Collaborative R&D benefits from strong internal leadership and facilitation. Alliance R&D requires these leaders to use skills differently to develop trusting, collegial relationships, engage partner schools, keep them on board, maintain momentum, navigate difficult territory, and manage risks.
- Leadership commitment and support at alliance level and among headteachers of participating schools is critical, sponsoring teacher participation and providing resources, including time. Distributing leadership to senior and middle leaders across schools and involving teachers helps ensure commitment, and creates leadership capacity, providing a safeguard if internal project leadership changes.

## Impact

- Well-focused, led, facilitated and supported collaborative R&D across alliances can have a positive impact on people at all levels of an alliance. Most important, well-targeted projects make a positive difference to pupils' learning experiences, progress, learning orientation and sense of wellbeing. Collaborative R&D also has benefits for participating teachers, including enhanced teaching practice, new patterns of thinking, higher expectations, increased motivation and greater

openness towards colleagues. Schools benefit from more powerful forms of professional learning, more learning-oriented and enquiry-hungry cultures, and increased leadership capacity. Alliances reap benefits of more trusting relationships and openness to sharing and critiquing practice.

- Tracking and determining impact is challenging. Ensuring rigour, collecting a baseline, getting the right balance of assessment and evaluation methods, and not going beyond what the data has to say are all issues. Success should not be attributed to one intervention when it is one of many concurrent activities.
- TSAs need support to evaluate their own projects. Diversity of projects, and their orientation towards innovation, requires a more creative, flexible and contextualised, as well as rigorous, approach.

## **Mobilisation and sustainability**

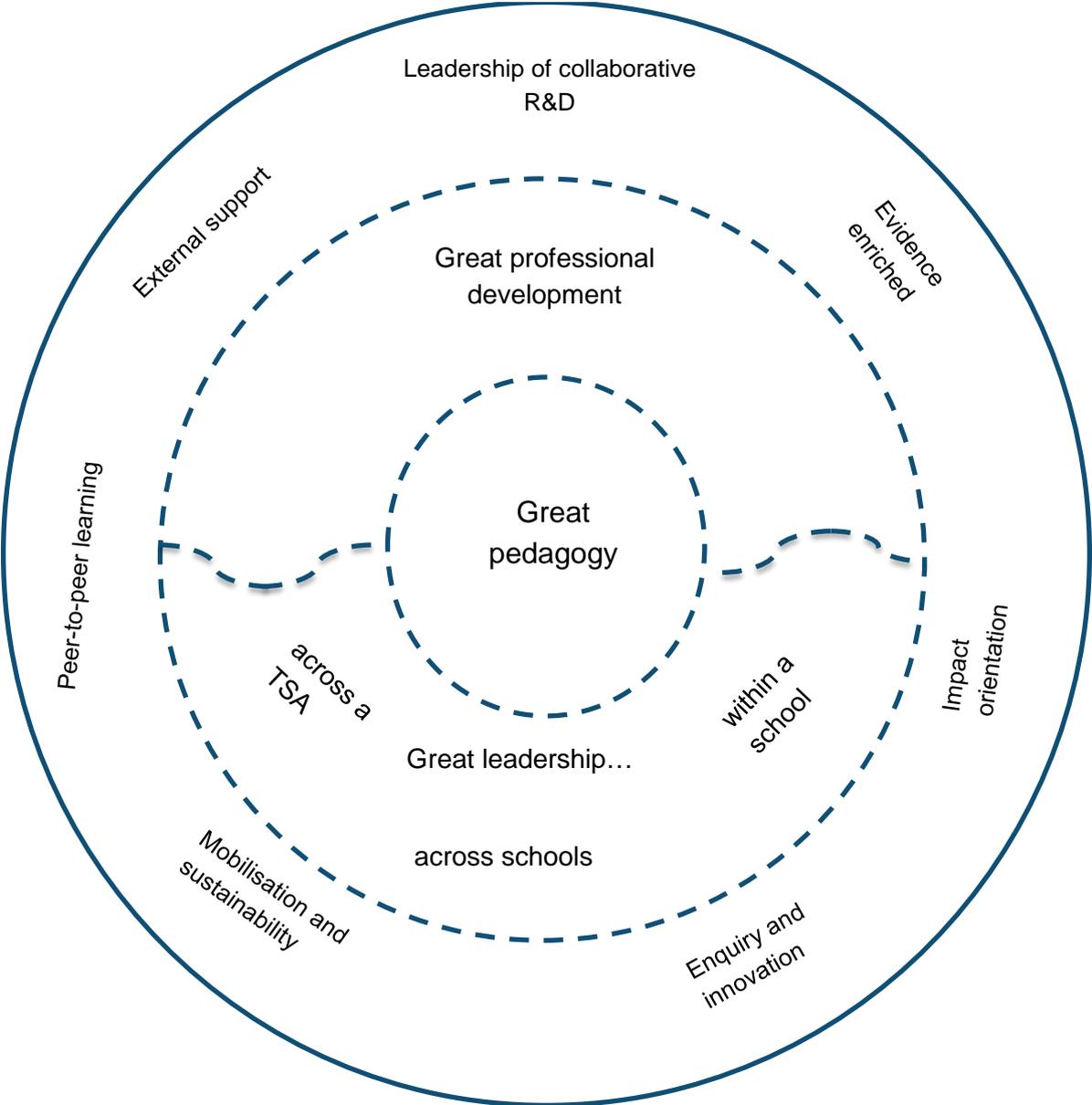
- Many strategies TSAs use to share their outcomes and learning with colleagues may raise awareness, but colleagues may not be sufficiently engaged to 'jump on board' and the new knowledge may not have a wider impact. It cannot be left to chance that this rich body of knowledge and excellent practice will be used elsewhere.
- Writing about project experiences, findings, impact and learning can be a challenge and requires support and guidance.
- Some TSAs focus on learning in their approach to mobilising their new knowledge, such as those focusing on collaborative professional development or developing enquiry skills as part of their projects. They are now taking this forward as a mechanism to engage more colleagues. Several alliances are using former project participants as leaders of project extensions.
- Project processes and development techniques are being built into several schools' and alliances repertoire to be adapted for use in other situations.
- Smaller, more narrowly focused projects may lead to greater depth and practice change but may be harder to replicate and transfer with other teachers. Larger projects focused on culture change – eg research or enquiry culture – may touch more schools but without a quick impact on pupils' learning and progress.
- Collaborative R&D across alliances requires practitioner research skills. Leading these projects is easier if alliances have a strategic emphasis on enquiry and research, and develop these skills within the alliance's professional development strategy. Lack of research capacity and skills are barriers to sustainability.

- Provision of time for participation and reflection on learning has contributed to the success of projects. TSAs received funding for projects. This may not exist for continued activity. This is a challenge to sustainability.
- Top-down accountability systems can be an obstacle to sustaining collaborative R&D across alliances in a self-improving system. Fear of engaging in or leading R&D demotivates. Destabilising risks (Rea et al, 2015a) need managing and may need rethinking. Relationships need to be more equal, supporting a development rather than a judgement mentality.
- There is no room for egos, empire building or an ‘us and them’ mentality in a self-improving system that promotes collaborative R&D across schools.

## **Collaborative R&D across a self-improving school system**

In conclusion, findings of the teaching schools R&D network national research themes project suggest that a number of elements are fundamental to ensure great pedagogy through collaborative R&D across a self-improving school system (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Collaborative R&D across a self-improving school system



## Questions for dialogue

Realising a vision of collaborative R&D across alliances which ensures great pedagogy in a self-improving school system is a challenge. The national teams have made their own recommendations (Nelson et al, 2015a; Maxwell, Greany et al, 2015) and posed strategic questions (Rea et al, 2015a). These will not be repeated, but all are important to consider. As the focus is on R&D and enquiry in a self-improving system, the following additional thoughts are framed as questions rather than recommendations.

## Questions for teaching school and other alliance leaders

- What do the messages about each theme and cross-cutting messages add to your understanding about ensuring great pedagogy across your TSA or partnership? What resonates and what challenges your thinking? How might you take this knowledge forward in your own R&D?
- Which elements of collaborative R&D across a self-improving school system (figure 2) are currently in place in your context? Are they successful and embedded? How do you know? What can you do to develop other elements?
- Is it better to start small with a few teachers and schools working on narrowly focused projects, or go immediately for systemic, cultural change? Is it either / or? How might both be achieved at one time?
- In succession planning and leadership capacity development, how can TSAs and other partnerships ensure that new leaders gain the experience and learning they need to use leadership skills differently in leading R&D projects?

## Questions for policymakers

- What support can government provide to help TSAs create capacity to ensure that initial projects are sustainable and that knowledge is mobilised in ways that will ensure learning and extend impact?
- What incentives might there be for other partnerships, chains and federations to become (further involved) in order to widen the reach of collaborative R&D across partnerships that ensures great pedagogy?
- What changes could be made to the existing accountability framework that both maintains standards and quality while creating a culture that genuinely values collaborative, evidence-based improvement?

## Questions for universities and other research partners

- How can universities and other research partners best support TSAs and other partnerships in a self-improving school system? What support and guidance can they provide in how to design and implement evidence-informed R&D projects and practice? What toolkits and frameworks could they develop?
- What does a sustainable and genuine alliance-university partnership look like? What has to change from both sides' perspective? How can research councils and higher education funding bodies support universities in developing this?
- How can universities and researchers bring to bear what they know about knowledge exchange and professional learning to support TSAs in finding powerful ways to engage others with their findings?

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