



Joint practice development (JPD)

What does the evidence suggest are effective approaches?

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Resource

Purpose

The introduction of teaching schools with a responsibility to develop practice through use of research provides an exciting opportunity to make real progress through collaboration across schools. This paper provides teaching school leaders and teachers in the developing alliances with a summary of the key points that emerge from the research on joint practice development (JPD). This will inform the design of subsequent work undertaken by teaching school alliances in supporting JPD. Embedding effective structures and experiences for learning, and ongoing research, across schools will help long-term improvement and sustainability. The authors acknowledge the lack of an agreed definition, or even common understanding, of JPD, and have provided one here in order to move forward – stimulating and supporting development of teaching school alliances¹.

What is already known about JPD in schools? Existing approaches to JPD, knowledge transfer, research-engaged schools and learning communities are reviewed. Teaching school alliance partners such (as higher education institutions and local authorities) might be able to support approaches that emerge from the review, such as research in classrooms or school self-evaluation.

What is joint practice development?

The term joint practice development was first proposed by Fielding et al (2005) in one of the few studies to have investigated transfer of practice between individuals, small teams, schools, local authorities and other institutions. These authors defined JPD as the process of learning new ways of working through mutual engagement that opens up and shares practices with others.

They concluded that the process by which individuals, schools or other organisations learn from one another involves interaction and mutual development, sometimes co-constructing new ways of working. Hence, they coined the term ‘joint practice development’ in favour of ‘transfer of practice’ and noted that ‘knowledge’ or practice are exchanged rather than transferred. This argument is further reflected in Hargreaves (2011) and similarly, in studies on the use of research (Levin, 2004; Nutley et al, 2007) which note that transfer of (research) knowledge does not guarantee its use without interaction. Within the process of JPD, the mutual learning that takes place sometimes involves transfer or exchange of knowledge but must involve interaction related to practice. Hence, it might be helpful for teaching alliances to think about the added value of cross-school interactions that focus on practice.

¹ We refer to teaching schools throughout, but most of what is said applies equally to schools and academies generally. Most of the approaches to JPD apply equally to different phases.

What types of knowledge and practice should be exchanged?

Promoting JPD raises the question of what should be developed, what should be regarded as good evidence and practice, and how the exchange and further use of bad evidence or practice might be limited? The journalist Ben Goldacre² has shown that highly publicised research is not necessarily the highest quality research, and has exposed the dangers of misinformation.

High quality syntheses of research, with a specific focus on quality assured studies, can establish greater trust in the overall findings and support JPD. Areas where little or no such evidence is readily available or where locally generated evidence exists may also be progressed through JPD. Higher education partners and the National College research and development projects can help schools to judge which types of evidence strengthen the basis for further development.

²<http://www.badscience.net/>

Ten key messages from research about JPD

In summary, the literature suggests that the following ten processes are key to supporting effective JPD across a teaching school alliance:

- **Clearly articulated aims and improvement priorities** (Cousins and Leithwood, 1993; Earl et al, 2006; McGregor et al, 2006; Stoll, 2009) for the alliance are needed to frame effective joint practice development
- **Developing trust** is a crucial characteristic of effective JPD (Fielding et al, 2005; Earl et al, 2006; Coleman, 2010; Hargreaves, 2011) and one which school leaders will need to establish with teachers
- **Building on existing relationships and networks** between teachers is an effective strategy in achieving progress (Fielding et al., 2005; Earl et al, 2006; Cooper & Levin, 2010; Stoll, 2009)
- **Developing effective networks** requires careful thinking and planning by school leaders in order to coordinate the work of alliances (McCormick et al, 2010; Carmichael et al, 2006) and support teachers' practice
- **Recognition of respective roles and contributions** of individuals and schools within the alliance is critical to success (Wikeley, 1998; Fielding et al., 2005; Earl et al, 2006; Stoll, 2009; Coleman, 2010; Hargreaves, 2011)
- **Multilevel (distributed) and multisite leadership** should be viewed as essential (Allen and Cherry, 2000; Earl and Katz, 2007; Hadfield and Chapman, 2009)
- **Challenge and support** that is effective and appropriate across partners is vital to building capacity for sustainable JPD (Hemsley-Brown and Sharp, 2004; Hadfield et al, 2005; McLaughlin et al, 2005; McGregor et al, 2006; Fielding, Sebba and Carnie, 2007; Kent et al, 2011)
- **Knowledge that meets the local needs** of schools (and is therefore salient) with continuous exposure will maximise implementation (Cousins and Leithwood, 1993; Hemsley-Brown and Sharp, 2004; Hadfield et al, 2005; McLaughlin et al, 2005; McGregor et al, 2006; Fielding, Sebba and Carnie, 2007; Sebba et al, 2011)
- **Student participation in decision-making and governance** of schools within alliances will enhance the effectiveness of JPD providing that it is meaningful and appropriate (McGregor et al, 2006; Sebba and Robinson, 2010)
- **Addressing competing priorities** that exist within schools and supporting them to integrate these more effectively will be vital to the success of the alliances (Hargreaves, 1994)

Each of these is expanded upon below providing a summary of the evidence, implications for practice, examples of what the teaching school alliances might consider developing and some questions for further discussion.

1. Clearly articulated aims and improvement priorities

Summary of evidence: Effective JPD requires a clear sense of purpose, a mutually agreed upon and shared focus with priorities for improvement. These need to be regularly evaluated and re-stated (Stoll, 2009). JPD also needs to be linked to a 'theory of action' (Earl et al, 2006) that is, a set of agreed and logically connected statements that link people's actions with outcomes. For instance, Fielding, Sebba and Carnie (2007), gave the example of a primary school which drew on practice from another school to give students a lesson by lesson choice of what level of work they could do, depending on their own perception of how much they felt they had understood. As with the junior school that originated the idea, this showed immediate success, in particular for some students with low self esteem who chose harder work and succeeded in it.

Implications for practice and examples: Establish means by which each alliance partner draws on its wider school community to prioritise aims – through student surveys, staff meetings, discussions between governors and staff, and governors and students. Identify two to three priorities for each partner in the alliance, or review existing ones in the light of broader views heard. Develop communication structures with representatives from multiple levels of the organisation. Develop mechanisms for regular evaluation and revision of aims.

2. Developing trust

Summary of evidence: Hargreaves (2011) and Coleman (2010) both stress that trust is crucial for effective JPD. The importance of trust is highlighted by Fielding et al's (2005) research as well as by Bolam et al (2005) drawing on research on professional learning communities and Earl et al's (2006) evaluation of networked learning communities. They noted that trust, shared understanding and collective responsibility were critical to effective change. Mitton et al (2007) systematically reviewed literature in order to determine the key elements of effective knowledge transfer and exchange practice (focusing on studies that might aid the adoption of evidence into healthcare policy in Canada). From this they produced a list of barriers and facilitators, and a key facilitator was trust. Trust is particularly important within leadership in relation to JPD, where deeper levels are needed to ensure that reciprocal challenge can develop. JPD is likely to involve observation and evaluation of teachers' practice in classrooms which is far more challenging to participants than activities for exchange of information, which survey evidence suggests is the current dominant form of professional development for most teachers (Pedder et al, 2009).

Implications for practice and examples: Coleman suggests that school leaders working collaboratively will need to demonstrate the spirit of partnership through their own actions and effective communication which promotes mutual understanding. Modelling these actions will assist in securing others in the school to act similarly. Clear protocols are needed from the outset for use of time, peer observation, acknowledgement of those involved, and the relationships between JPD and performance management or inspection of teachers' practice.

3. Building on existing relationships and networks

Summary of evidence: Knowledge transfer literature such as Cooper & Levin (2010) Mitton et al (2007) and Nutley et al (2007), has emphasised the important role of social and professional networks in contributing to whether research is used in practice. A main factor identified in effective JPD by Fielding et al (2005), was the opportunity to build on existing established relationships. Many bases for these existing networks were noted, such as individual friendships, previous colleagues, or subject departments working together across schools. Crucially, in these existing relationships and networks, trust and motivating and energising one another had already been established, so building on these gave a strong platform from which to develop. However, Fielding et al noted that these established relationships can support complacency over time or activities can break down where partners fall out (see key message 7 on challenge and support). Furthermore, McCormick et al's (2010) report on an extensive investigation of educational networks concluded that activities tended to be clustered around a school or project but were often insufficiently connected to one another to ensure longer-term sustainability.

Implications for practice and examples: The alliance can undertake an analysis of whether its activities are sufficiently connected, and any areas for modification or new development of networks. These can be organisational or managerial, software- or paper-based, with or without face-to-face interaction, as appropriate. Carmichael et al (2006) describe a simple 'mapping exercise' in which school staff are invited to draw a diagram showing the networks in which their school participates, to identify existing networks within and between individuals and organisations which can be used to map established relationships and identify gaps for further development (Carmichael et al, 2006). This could be used by schools seeking to create and extend new relationships as a part of designing and developing their JPD.

4. Developing effective networks

Summary of evidence: The idea of the network has become pervasive in educational thinking about how schools and teachers should collaborate, as eloquently argued, for example, by Hargreaves (2003). Findings from a systematic review undertaken by Hemsley-Brown and Sharp (2004) noted that the development of communication networks, links between researchers and practitioners, and greater involvement of practitioners in the research process, emerged as effective strategies for increasing engagement in research use in schools.

McCormick et al (2010) warned about assumptions that the network participants share a common understanding of their aims, roles and functions. There is a critical distinction between using networks as a delivery service to support JPD based in other forms of interaction, versus participation in the network itself being the core JPD activity. While both have their uses, it is evidently critical that all participants agree on the function of the network. This research also highlighted the challenge of engaging teachers not directly involved in initial activities.

Implications for practice and examples: The mapping described in key message 3 could be used to describe participants' perceptions of network as well as showing perceived and actual networks that different stakeholders participate in across schools. Teaching school alliances could develop a mutual understanding about how different networks support and extend the research and development activities of the alliance. Given the requirement for alliances to move quickly to being self-sustaining, it is particularly important to establish a long-term commitment from the alliance partners to maintain and develop any software or web platforms being used by the network.

5. Recognition of respective roles and contributions

Summary of evidence: Fielding et al (2005) noted the negative effects of 'badging', which can inhibit effective sharing of practice by influencing expectations or attributing a higher status to one partner. Similarly, Wikeley (1998) examined how research on good practice was disseminated to teachers by school leaders from six high-performing departments sharing research with peers in a consortium of 15 schools, to inform school improvement. She found that these leaders were regarded as having an unwarranted status as experts and that this negatively affected attempts at knowledge transfer. Fielding et al noted that so-called 'originators' or leaders often benefited more extensively than the so-called 'recipients', suggesting the need to recognise the mutual benefit in relationships involving knowledge transfer, by acknowledging that all partners have something to offer and to gain.

Implications for practice and examples: Teaching school alliances will need to acknowledge and build on the strengths of the alliance partners to enable relationships to be forged on a non-hierarchical basis. This will ensure that all partners are recognized as potential resources for learning. In establishing aims and priorities, all partners will need to identify their strengths, skills and foci for improvement so that the coordinating teaching school can broker relationships that make best use of the resources across the alliance. Clear protocols can assist in ensuring partners are working together on a mutually-understood basis.

6. Multilevel (distributed) and multisite leadership

Summary of evidence: Where several schools are involved in a network, multilevel, shared and collaborative forms of leadership are critical (Allen and Cherry, 2000). In an evaluation of networked learning communities, Earl and Katz (2007) found distributed leadership to be a key feature of learning networks. Here, the leaders took on a diversity of roles: leading network projects, connecting their school to the network and sharing their knowledge and learning. Formal leadership was also noted to be important, with school leaders providing a big picture overview, setting the vision, encouraging staff participation, locating necessary resources, and providing other support and opportunities for capacity building. Network facilitators who work collaboratively across formal and informal roles to ensure that the JPD is designed, developed, focused and sustained, also provide a vital leadership role (Hadfield and Chapman, 2009).

Implications for practice and examples: Some schools within alliances will have established distributed leadership structures such as multilevel steering groups for specific areas of activity that can be emulated or expanded as ways of working across the alliance. The alliance might identify facilitators for each priority area who then work with a distributed team of staff and students responsible for that area. These groups will need to establish long term means to ensure ongoing challenge, so that significant improvement is always a target (see key message 7).

7. Challenge and support that is effective and appropriate

Summary of evidence: McLaughlin et al (2005) suggest that key factors for building research capacity in practitioner communities are external support and facilitation, alignment of issues with the school and network, and effective leadership. However, research on school-to-school collaboration (for example, Fielding, Sebba & Carnie, 2007; Sebba et al, 2011) demonstrates the delicate balance that is needed between support, challenge and capacity building. Long-term sustainability is likely to be limited where the support and challenge provided creates dependency rather than building capacity. Often, collaboration becomes vulnerable when one person moves on because a dependency culture has been created. McGregor et al (2006) note that this can be avoided where a range of key people operate across the network. Hadfield et al (2005) reported that half of the 76 networks in their review suggested progress was related to the learning infrastructure of a network: the way that networks provide the time, space, roles and opportunities that people need to share practice, engage in enquiry, or plan units of work together.

The role of coaching in providing challenge and support is well documented. There is also strong evidence for the role of coaching in changing teachers' practice, with teachers becoming more focused in their aims and versatile in their approaches as well as reporting benefits of modelling and increases in confidence and enthusiasm (Cordingley et al, 2003). More commonly, coaching involves the coach watching the learner teach and then giving feedback but the strongest evidence comes from Showers and Joyce (1996), who report the greatest benefit when the coach is the person teaching and the observer, the one being coached, since the observer is expected to learn more from watching a colleague teach; in general, coaching should be perceived as a collaborative activity between teachers, not a one-way expert critique.

Implications for practice and examples: Teaching alliances could provide support through teams within and across schools and ensure that practices for future capacity building, such as regular reciprocal coaching across schools, are embedded widely into practice. Methods such as peer observation of lessons across schools and lesson study provide challenge by opening up actual teaching practice to the critique of others. For example, in the Portsmouth Learning Community (Fielding, Sebba & Carnie, 2007), a number of schools planned together using lesson study visits to each others' schools to explore how they could improve mathematics teaching. A recent evaluation of lesson study in mathematics in schools in the USA (Waterman, 2011) concluded that students whose teachers participate in lesson study gained significantly more in knowledge and skills than the students did in other classes.

The principles which should be encouraged within teaching school alliances include agreed shared ground rules, clear focus for inquiry which draws on previous evidence, joint lesson planning, joint observation and analysis of lessons. Video recording of lessons is a very effective means for self- and shared-analysis of teaching practice, and a means to overcome practical barriers to incorporating JPD involving peer observation and coaching into teachers' busy daily schedules (Hennessy and Deaney, 2009). Teachers are, however, typically uneasy about being judged through video evidence (Sebba et al, 2011), so it is critical to have clear protocols about how video is used and by who, and to have collaborative settings where teachers discuss the video (Coles, 2010).

8. Knowledge that meets local needs

Summary of evidence: Effective knowledge exchange and implementation of new practice depends on the sustained exposure to research that meets the local needs of schools and practitioners, having salience with their practice and identified problems. In addition, JPD is significantly improved when practitioners are involved in the design, delivery and follow-up activities associated with the research (Cousins and Leithwood, 1993). Similarly, Hemsley-Brown and Sharp (2004) concluded from their review, that approaches which address local needs were more effective in JPD. Studies of collaborative continuing professional development (CPD) by Cordingley et al (2003, 2005) suggest that CPD based in the classrooms of the teachers involved, led to better student and teacher outcomes. Continual rather than one-off exposure to research has greater impact; teachers need sustained opportunities to link their understanding of research to their knowledge of teaching (Hemsley-Brown and Sharp, 2004). In their evaluation of networked learning communities, McLaughlin et al (2005) noted that practitioners' engagement in using research does not necessarily lead seamlessly into practitioners' undertaking research.

Implications for practice and examples: Teaching alliances will be in a strong position to address local needs by identifying their own priorities and either using existing research or conducting their own research to address these needs. They could, for example, promote JPD through peer observation of lessons across schools, which would enable them to gather evidence across the alliance on priority issues. The Portsmouth Learning Community (Fielding, Sebba and Carnie, 2007) used this approach across the city, encouraging staff visiting other schools to look at a particular area of practice which they then drew upon with other colleagues involved in the visit, as well as giving feedback to those observed.

9. Student participation in decision-making and governance

Summary of the evidence: McGregor et al (2006) noted that 30 per cent of networked learning communities identified student voice as a key feature of successful networked learning. Networks reported use of student voice activity in a variety of ways, including: student perception questionnaires and feedback on teaching and learning; conferences for young people; and students as researchers and co-researchers. Recent evaluations (for example, Sebba & Robinson, 2010) suggest that students' participation in governing bodies and staff appointments help establish ownership and leadership in the school community. The use of lesson observation across schools, undertaken by students to evaluate teaching and learning, have been crucial to providing challenge and support for the improvement of teaching. Students undertaking this work are taking an active role in the JPD partnerships.

Implications for practice and examples: Teaching school alliances have an opportunity to engage in JPD with students through considering their role in the governance structures. In addition, setting up student observation of lessons across schools and student surveys in order to provide feedback on their practice could be an expectation in the longer term, since it provides the most challenging data for a school to address. Where teachers have felt threatened by this practice, students observing lessons in another school and then feeding back general observations to their own school can be the first step. However, in the longer term, a teaching school alliance will only continue to be challenged and progress if feedback from students becomes well established. Clear protocols for this work need to be negotiated and students 'trained' in observation and feedback.

10. Addressing competing priorities

Summary of the evidence: Dealing with the competing priorities that exist within schools, and identifying ways of working with and around these, will be vital to the success of the alliances (Hargreaves, 1994). In the Portsmouth Learning Community (Fielding, Sebba and Carnie, 2007) effective school-to-school learning was more often observed in schools where initiative overload was counteracted by school leaders who created cohesion, for example by adopting new initiatives to pursue changes that had already been planned. This strategy is well established in the school improvement literature and is essential to the development of JPD.

Implications for practice and examples: JPD needs to be seen as a means of achieving progress on priorities identified by the schools in the alliance, not as an additional extra. Given that alliance schools are receiving additional cash resource for the JPD activities, commitment to engage in these should be realisable: the benefits experienced should convince them of the value of continued engagement, and of the possibility that JPD could reduce rather than exacerbate competing priorities. The teaching school as coordinating partner should organise for the capture of evidence about such success to inform future developments.

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