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Leadership of great pedagogy in teaching school alliances: evidence from the literature

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Resource

Research and development network national themes: theme three

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Introduction

This is a summary of the key findings of a review of selected literature organised around what we refer to as 'modest claims' about successful leadership for learning and development in inter-school networks and partnerships. The claims are modest because these formally designated partnerships are relatively new and, therefore, research has as yet been unable to assess their influence and impact upon the quality of educational provision.

It is intended that these claims will serve as a point of departure for a two-year study which aims to support a number of teaching school alliances (up to 33) to engage in research and development activities on leadership and pedagogy and through these, improve the standards and quality of teaching and learning. They provide research-informed common focuses of leadership strategies which help leaders of teaching school alliances diagnose the stages of their alliances' development in Hargreaves' maturity model (Hargreaves, 2011) and function as a strategic leadership guide and support for their decision on how a particular intervention should be led and implemented in order to move their alliance towards more mature phases of development (from 'beginning' to 'leading').

Although we do not yet have sufficient empirical evidence on what makes a teaching school alliance successful, fortunately we know a great deal about what constitutes successful school-based professional learning communities, networks and partnerships and successful school leadership. The purpose of this paper is to provide a synopsis of this knowledge.

Teaching school alliances are a new educational enterprise in England. They are built upon the concept of the teaching hospital and previous models of school-based initial teacher training and continuing professional development (Hargreaves, 2011). They are in essence forms of inter-school partnership which entail engaging with alliance partner schools and other local schools for the benefit of all.

It is in the nature of the enterprise that the work does not belong to any one individual or one particular school. Rather, it is jointly owned by the participating schools which also share responsibility for its quality. For example, whilst there may be one 'leader of leaders' (eg executive head), in practice leadership must be distributed within a collective and explicit understanding of the values and vision that drive the enterprise.

Structures, relationships, cultures and interventions play an integral part in determining the direction, growth and sustainability of the partnerships (Day et al, 2009). Structure refers to the formal organisational arrangements that are unique to each partnership. The relationships refer to how the participating schools and individuals act within the structures and how they interact with each other. Both contribute to the culture of the partnership ('who we are' and 'the way we do things around here'). The commitment to the promotion of collaborative action enquiry within and across schools ensures that interventions are embedded in and owned by them, and thus functions as a means to the end of enhancing collective capacity and improving standards.

There is clear evidence in the research literature to show that effective inter-school partnerships forge relationships across previously isolated schools and through these, create a culture of collaborative learning and increase the capacity of partner schools for learning and development (Muijs & West, 2006; West, Ainscow, & Muijs, 2006; Harris & Thomson, 2006). There is also some evidence, albeit limited, which points to the positive impact of school-to-school collaboration on school improvement and student outcomes (Chapman, Muijs & MacAllister, 2011; Muijs, Chapman & Sammons, 2010; Ainscow, Muijs & West, 2007). Effective leadership is found to be essential for successful school-to-school collaboration (Lee, in press).

Eight modest claims about leadership for learning in effective inter-school partnerships

1. Context matters. The ways in which the structure and governance of the partnership are designed demonstrate responsiveness to the contexts in which schools work and are fit for purpose.

Much has been written about the high degree of culturally responsive leadership practices that successful leaders apply to their schools (Leithwood et al, 2006) and how differences in context affect the nature, direction and pace of leadership actions and through these, the effectiveness of the schools (Day et al, 2010; Gu & Johansson, in press).

There is also evidence to suggest that a more contextually sensitive approach to school-to-school networking yields greater returns of intellectual capital and achievement (Chapman, 2008). As the English school system becomes increasingly diverse, to be effective and enduring, inter-school partnerships must build upon disciplined procedures for forming, managing and monitoring the social make-up of the partnership, the strategic rationale for its existence, and its operating rules and activities (Hargreaves, 2011; de Rond, 2003).

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for effective collaboration except that a deep sense of empathy for local integrity is fundamental (Mongon & Chapman, 2009).

2. Leadership structure and governance arrangements matter. The form of governance should reflect the purpose, scope and intensity of the partnership's activities. Although there is no prescription for effective partnerships, all should have strong and clear strategic, operational and professional arrangements as well as dedicated, tiered leadership support for managing the development of the partnership (Hill, 2008).

There is a wide spectrum of governance models available to effective partnerships, ranging from relatively informal (soft) collaborations to formal (hard) management structures and governance arrangements. The key to success is to consider carefully whether the governance structure is right for partner schools' particular circumstances (Chapman et al, 2011; Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), 2008).

Strong partnerships may be recognised through the horizontal links that are formed between individuals at the same level across schools (ie peer-to-peer structures at different layers) as well as the vertical links that involve individuals from different levels of each school's internal hierarchy (Hadfield & Chapman, 2011). The key to harnessing such partnership structures is to increase the proximity of these sets of relationships between partner schools through regular interaction and communication (Hansen, 1999).

3. Relationships and trust matter. Social relations among schools and individuals play a fundamental role in developing and deepening a collaborative culture that facilitates knowledge and practice transfer both within and across schools. The strength of trust is the most important influence on collective capacity for collaboration.

Accumulated evidence suggests that strong social ties lead to collaborative leadership, collective school capacity, school improvement and greater knowledge transfer within and across school boundaries (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Mourshed, Chijioki, & Barber, 2010).

Trust is difficult to achieve and maintain in today's complex and rapidly changing world (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). However, school leaders must cultivate trust through their values and behaviours if they are to build, develop and deepen high-quality collaborative relationships and cultures for learning and achievement (Bryke & Schneider, 2002). There are eight facets of leadership trust: benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability and competency (Hoy and Tschannen-Moran, 2003); wisdom, educational ideals and care (Day, 2009).

In inter-school partnerships, trust has been described as a key soft network structure which brings people together to fulfil their shared mission of raising standards (Church et al, 2002). Trustworthy relationships between partners determine the quality of organisational knowledge and practice transfer (see, for example, van Wijk, Jansen & Lyles, 2008; Szulanski, Capetta & Jensen, 2004; Lane et al, 2001). This is because 'Once trust is established, openness about practice follows' (Lieberman & Miller, 2008a:106).

4. Shared vision and values matter. They serve as a necessary precondition for creating, building and deepening communities of practice for learning, development and achievement.

Ensuring that there is continuity of purpose and vision is key to sustaining the effectiveness of system leadership and the sustained improvement of pedagogy and achievement (Mourshed, Chijioki and Barber, 2010).

Achieving and sustaining effective partnerships are not only about the individual's skills, but 'a skilled system' (Mourshed et al, 2010:112) which is built upon enhancing the collective capacity of people and driven by clearly articulated and regularly communicated shared educational values and ideals of people and organisations. These values find their root in beliefs about equity, ambition, respect, care and achievement for all (Day et al, 2010).

5. Communication matters. Effective communication is vital in every aspect of how a school-to-school partnership works.

Building strong communication systems is paramount in ensuring common understanding of the moral purpose of the partnership and a consistent view of its core aims and objectives (Coleman, 2011). Effective communication is also fundamental to the ongoing development of trust in the partnership (Hill, 2008).

6. Distributing leadership matters. Distributed system leadership builds upon an organisational commitment to raise the achievement of other schools and is a necessary condition for mature inter-school collaboration and healthy competition.

Within the growing context of school-to-school networks, distributed leadership, based upon trust, with an emphasis on preparing, developing and empowering individuals at every level, is found to provide greater

opportunities for members to learn from one another (Leithwood et al, 2006). Networks offer opportunities for teachers to share, initiate and embed new practices (Bell et al, 2006).

Whilst there is little empirical research evidence pointing to the direct link between networking and achievement, the data that does exist highlights a positive relationship between increased teacher leadership both within and across schools and organisational development (Leithwood et al, 2006).

What differentiates leadership within school-to-school partnerships is the need for brokerage between schools (Muijs, Chapman & Sammons, 2010), or what one might call partnership competence: 'the ability to forge partnerships with other schools' (Hargreaves, 2010:15).

7. System leaders' personal characteristics and professional competences matter. Successful system leaders possess core competences and share similar behaviour patterns in promoting collaborative working within the partnership.

Successful system leaders 'have clear moral purpose (value-based), possess deep self-awareness (awareness of self) and exhibit intellectual nimbleness' (Lee, in press:28). They also demonstrate generosity of spirit, personal humility with intense professional will, contagious enthusiasm, determination and resilience, persistence, hope and optimism (Matthews & Hill, 2010).

In practice, successful system leaders are skilled communicators who can build trust and capacity, promote knowledge transfer, transform interpersonal and inter-organisational relationships and also plan for sustainability (Hill, 2004).

8. Identifying broad phases of development matters. These development phases enable leaders to prioritise combinations of strategies which create the optimum conditions for effective learning and development within and across these phases.

Like professional learning communities (Lieberman & Miller, 2008b), each school-to-school partnership is unique, generating its own path of development and finding its own way to build partnership identities and to learn from other school partners. However, the paths that partnerships take in forging and maintaining the commitment and capacity of their members all move through three distinct phases: beginning, evolving and mature (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001).

The literature pertaining to successful school leadership suggests that:

Effective heads make judgements, according to their context, about the timing, selection, relevance, application and continuation of strategies that create the right conditions for effective teaching, learning and pupil achievement within and across broad development phases.

Day et al, 2010:15

Such contextually sensitive and culturally responsive layered leadership strategies apply equally to the leadership of effective inter-school partnerships.

Collaborative action enquiry for improvement

The continued growth of inter-school partnerships requires joint action. In terms of leadership for learning, a key component is action enquiry. This was a core activity of the networked learning communities promoted nationally by the National College, and its benefits have been widely documented (Sammons et al, 2007; Earl et al, 2006; Chapman & Aspin, 2002; Jackson, 2002).

The action enquiry process (see Figure 1) involves four elements (Chapman, 2008):

— understanding context

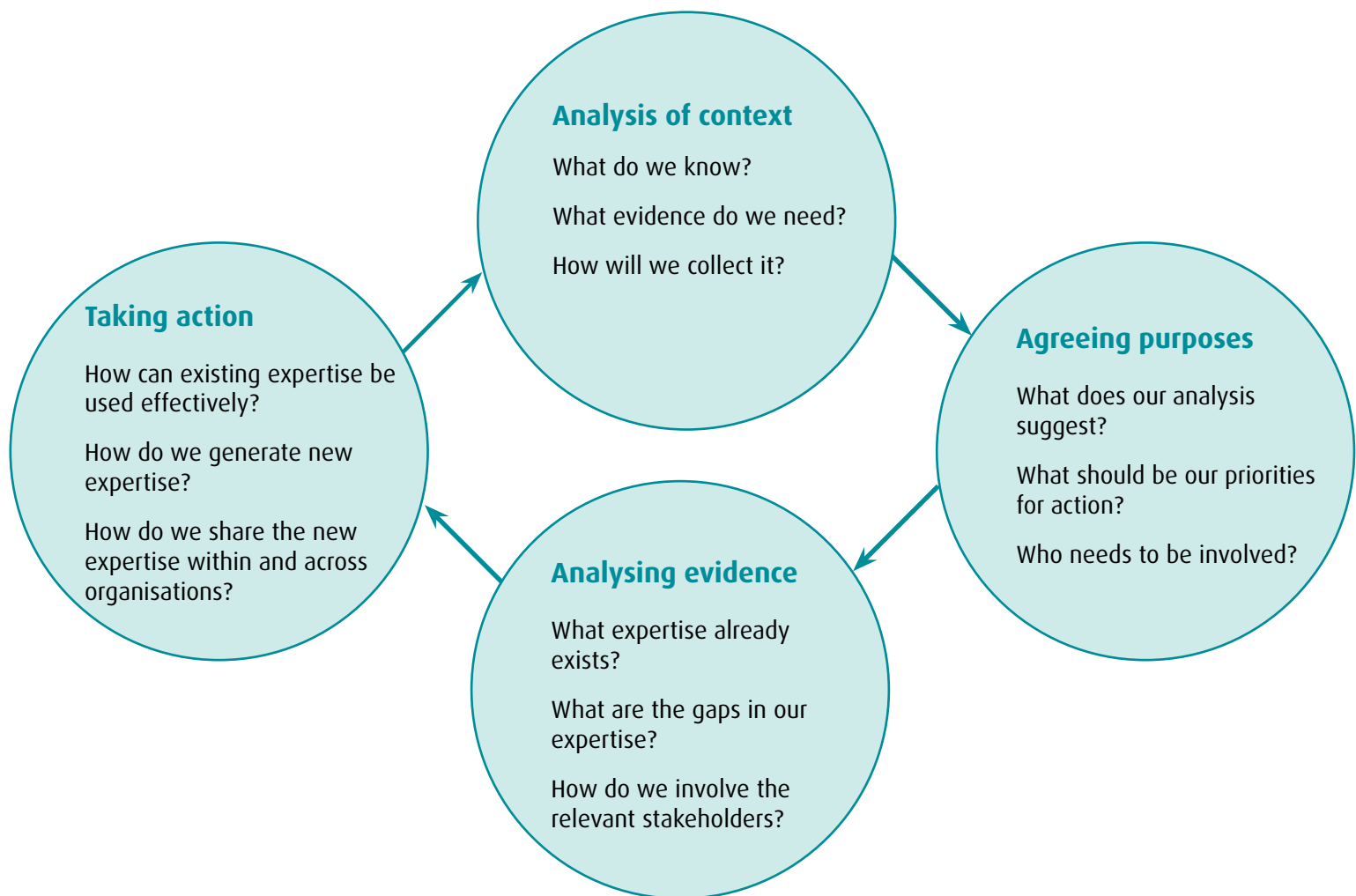— defining purposes

— analysing evidence

— taking action

The outcomes of this process release untapped potential for collaborative learning through the identification of existing expertise, the generation of new expertise and the transfer of expertise within and across school boundaries (Hadfield & Chapman, 2011).

Added to this, therefore, would be:

— evaluating the influence and effects of action within the differences in individual schools' contexts and structures

These processes help leaders arrive at informed decisions regarding partnership structures and governance arrangements which, in turn, provide the means and the opportunity for joint working and effective collaboration (Hadfield and Chapman, 2011).

Figure 1: A framework for network leadership

Analysis of context

What do we know?

What evidence do we need?

How will we collect it?

Taking action

How can existing expertise be used effectively?

How do we generate new expertise?

How do we share the new expertise within and across organisations?

Agreeing purposes

What does our analysis suggest?

What should be our priorities for action?

Who needs to be involved?

Analysing evidence

What expertise already exists?

What are the gaps in our expertise?

How do we involve the relevant stakeholders?

Source: Hadfield & Chapman, 2011:927

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