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Research Associate Summary Report

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The strength of weak school ties

The importance of 'weak' relationships in sharing good
practice between schools

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Introduction

How schools might best learn from each other is a question that no school leader can afford to ignore. Many leaders will have experience of numerous school improvement projects that have, at their core, the presumption that practice that is effective in one school can be transferred successfully to another. Yet however much we might aspire to David Hargreaves' inspirational vision of practitioners 'thinking laterally' and creating an 'open-source' educational culture (Hargreaves, 2003), we often find our efforts frustrated by what has been described as the 'stickiness' of knowledge (Szulanski, 2003). The more research that can be undertaken and disseminated about what actually happens when schools try to learn from each other, the better prepared school leaders will be in their efforts towards school improvement.

One theme from the recent literature on practice transfer has been the importance of institutions developing close or strong ties with each other. The strength of a tie relationship has been described as depending on a range of factors, including its:

- intensity and intimacy
- duration and the frequency of contact between partners
- operation on different levels and about different subjects
- reciprocity, and the homogeneity of the partners
- exploitation of existing contacts and issues of geographical proximity

(Marsden and Campbell, 1984)

Recent studies into schools transferring practice have tended to describe how close, reciprocal relationships between schools, which give time and space to allow for the development of trust and subsequently the joint development of practice, have provided the most effective models of collaborative enterprise (Fielding et al, 2004). Implicitly, strong ties appear best. Yet Granovetter (1973), who first coined the 'tie strength' concept, points out that in many circumstances weak ties have their advantages. Can further research throw more light on the role of tie strength in practice transfer between schools?

Research context and methods

This research is based on an investigation of eight inter-school partnerships, undertaken within the context of the Raising Achievement and Transforming Learning (RATL) project. It comprised interviews with 20 RATL co-ordinators and other school practitioners in 12 schools.

Findings

The RATL relationships investigated did not fulfil any of the criteria indicating strong ties, as described in the introduction. Yet interestingly, this appeared to be perfectly consistent with an overriding impression from participants about the effectiveness of the project as a mechanism for practice transfer. The vast majority of participants concurred with Hargreaves et al (2006) concerning the efficacy of the project in general and their contact with other schools in particular (one deputy at a project school noted:

"I've not come across a better mechanism that appears to have had a greater impact than the RATL project."

Weak ties between schools would appear to be a source of strength when it comes to transferring practice under certain circumstances.

How could this be the case if the rather fleeting and transient nature of the relationships did not provide an opportunity for the development of trust, something consistently suggested as crucial in the literature? The evidence suggests some interesting explanations. Participants frequently talked about existing professional trust between fellow practitioners which guaranteed sufficient trust for some transfer activity. While this was something that could be lost, it nevertheless did not need constructing in the first place. Others talked about not needing to develop trust in another school because trust in the quality and integrity of the RATL project as a whole had already been established. Finally, some participants talked about the need for trust in a partner being superseded by trust in the individuals from their own school being able to see through any possible obfuscation from a partner.

Participants identified several potential benefits of relationships with weak tie characteristics.

- Weak tie relationships do not require the investment of resources necessary to sustain those with stronger ties. A one-off visit requires far less in terms of time, money and emotional intensity than one that is closer and more sustained. They thus allow schools access to a wide range of practice.
- They can happen over a much wider geographical area than would be possible for a strong tie relationship. Weak tie relationships allow schools to select partnerships on the basis of potential benefit rather than geographical convenience. They can therefore help schools break out of the potentially inward-looking agenda of a local area.
- Weak ties can offer more flexibility and ownership of practice development. Where a strong tie exists between schools, and practice is developed jointly by representatives from both institutions, there is a danger that the resultant practice will not entirely suit either, or that development will be hampered by conflicting cultural expectations.
- Weak ties are a good match for the competitive educational environment that schools perceive they are operating within. Participants overwhelmingly identified local competition as a major barrier to the development of practice transfer in their areas, and valued the chance to learn from other schools far removed from the (however unfortunate) reality of local competition.

Participants were very clear that being able to identify and articulate the advantages of the weak tie relationships they encountered through RATL did not mean that they dismissed the need for relationships of a stronger kind. Participants were able to contrast their RATL relationships with other relationships they had developed that did have stronger tie characteristics. Some were confident and clear about the need to match the type of relationship to the kind of practice they wanted to transfer.

Others expressed a nagging guilt that maybe they should be doing more to make their weak tie relationships stronger, despite the fact they could happily describe the benefits these weak tie relationships presented.

There was an overwhelming scepticism about the concept of 'best practice', particularly the officially sanctioned idea that practice that seems effective in one school can easily be reproduced in another with the same result. Yet this cynicism sat happily with an enthusiasm for the idea of school improvement facilitated by learning from other schools. Interestingly, while previous research has suggested a match between weak tie relationships and the transfer of the kind of explicit, codified knowledge that can easily be articulated as a blueprint or manual (Hansen, 1999), evidence from this research suggests that this was not something RATL participants desired. They almost universally agreed that any practice originating in another school must be substantially modified before it could have any relevance in a new context. What they wanted from their weak tie relationships was not a blueprint to be replicated, but ideas and inspiration that could catalyse developments in their own institutions. The major contributory factor to any practice development within their schools would be their own school's capacity. The external input was predominantly to provide direction and momentum.

Conclusions

The case for the importance of strong ties in the transfer of practice between secondary schools in England has been well made recently. Yet there is a danger that by implication the potential offered by weaker tie relationships will be ignored, and that practitioners will perpetually feel guilty about relationships that are more transient. This research sends a clear message to school leaders that they cannot afford to concentrate solely on developing one or two close relationships with partner schools. They must cast their net more widely and investigate innovative practice outside their area. They must make difficult decisions about the most appropriate type of relationship to aid any new practice development. The wise school leader will combine strong ties with select partners with the range offered by a changing array of weak tie partnerships.

The research also suggests that the concept of best practice is not necessarily a very helpful one. Perhaps on some occasions the label 'catalytic practice' would be more apt. It does not carry connotations of superiority and it captures the precise role that the practice in the originating school plays in the RATL relationships investigated here; not as a blueprint to be copied, but as a catalyst that initiates or accelerates the development of practice in a new context.

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