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Network Research
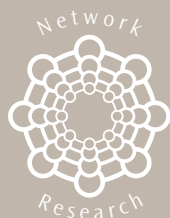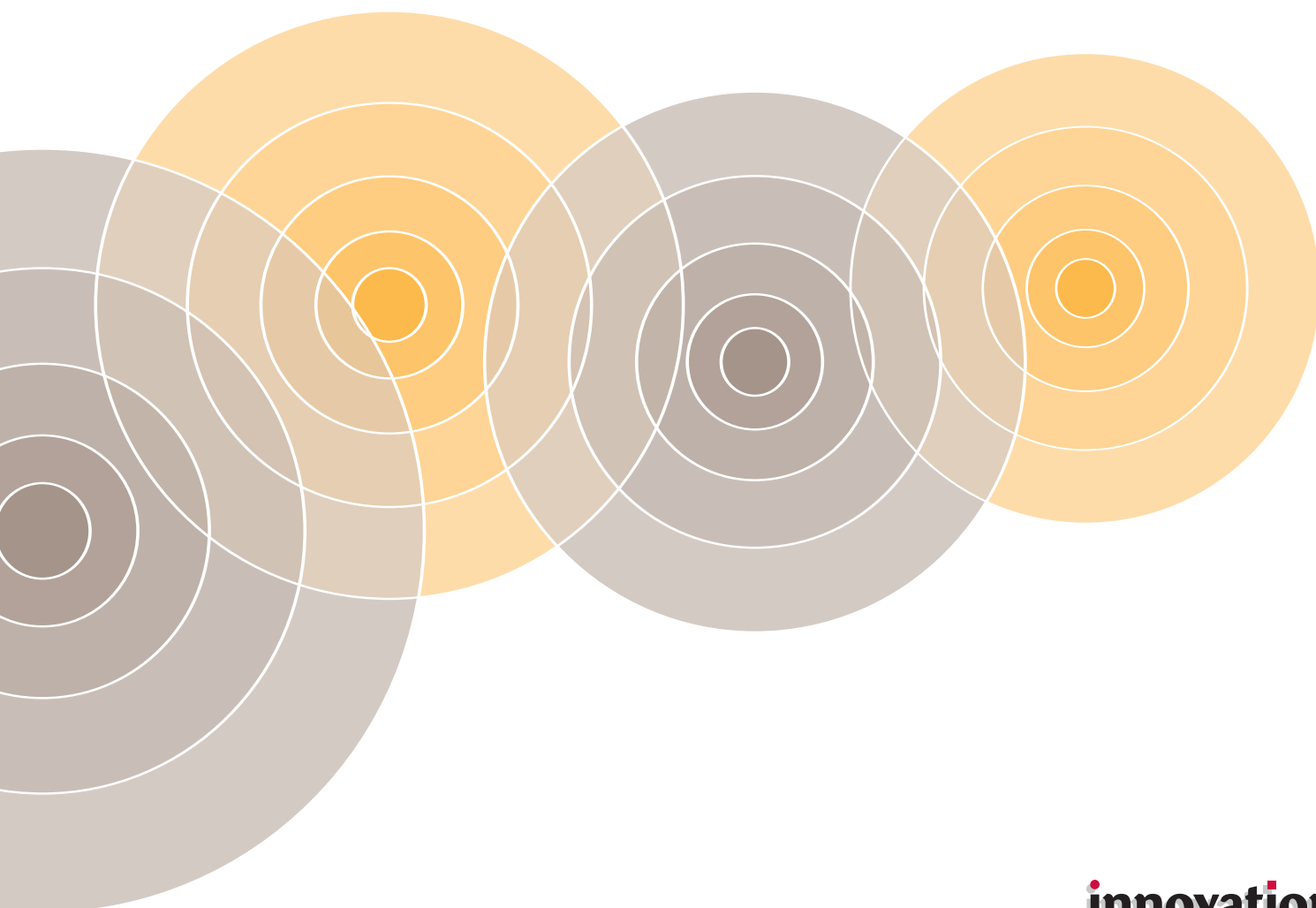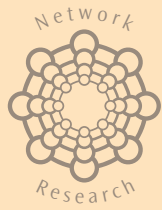
The impact of networking and collaboration: the existing knowledge base

A review of international accounts

innovation

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creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence

The impact of networking and collaboration: the existing knowledge base

A brief review of the literature

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The impact of networking and collaboration: the existing knowledge base

Introduction

The purpose of this review is to provide a preliminary synthesis of the literature examining the impact of networking and collaboration in networks involving schools and in multi-agency networks with an educational dimension. It covers almost 100 articles and reports, from a reading of around 200 documents. Articles were selected on the basis of the quality of evidence they contained in response to the following key questions:

• Do networks have an impact?

• How do networks achieve impact?

In this review we have begun to map the existing knowledge base in order to highlight key themes, issues and challenges relating to the impact of networks and collaboration in schools. As such, it is the precursor to our systematic literature review of collaborative networks which will be published in December 2005.

Background

Over the past few years, interest has grown in networks as a means of enabling effective practice to be developed and tested through collaboration within, between and among institutions. Networks seem to offer a promising means of integrating central educational strategies with practice, but we need robust evidence about how to optimise their impact if networked collaboration is to become integral to the wider system. This review is both a mapping of, and a contribution to, the evolving knowledge base.
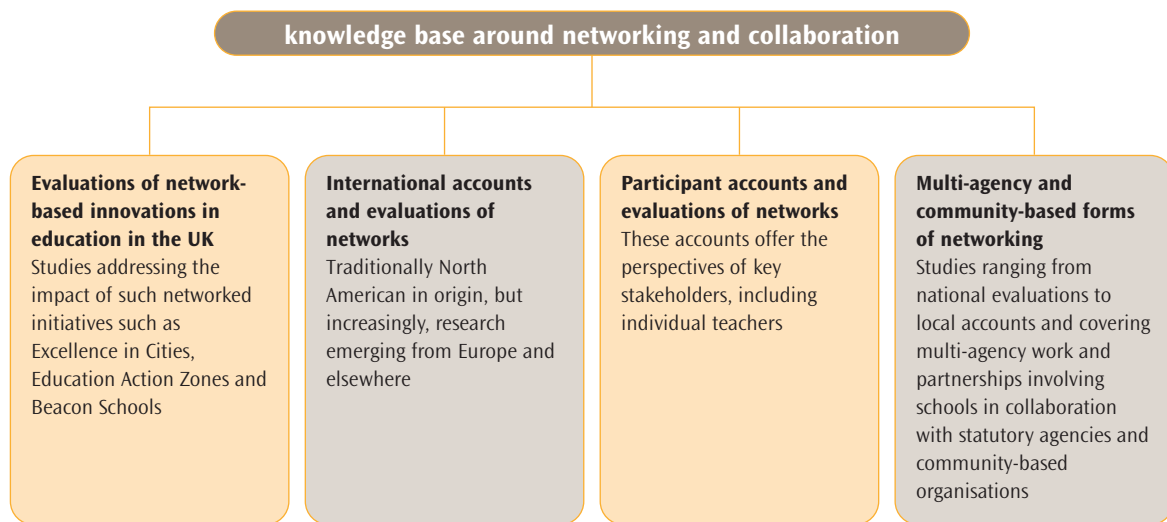
Currently, over half the schools in the UK are involved in centrally-funded network based initiatives. These range from the Leading Edge Partnership Programme, Primary Strategy Learning Networks and Education Improvement Partnerships to school-to-school programmes such as Excellence in Cities, Federations, and Specialist Schools. This is likely to increase as other services are linked to education in line with the *Every Child Matters* agenda. This review is therefore aimed at helping policy makers and practitioners draw on current knowledge of what works in collaborative networks.

Defining and categorising networks

As the literature on collaborative networks is an emerging area, we adopted an inclusive approach to the evidence and took the following definition of a network as our starting point:

A network means groups or systems of interconnected people and organisations (including schools) whose aims and purposes include the improvement of learning and aspects of well-being known to affect learning.

In order to synthesise the evidence, we have categorised the research into four broad areas. These are:

knowledge base around networking and collaboration

Evaluations of network-based innovations in education in the UK
Studies addressing the impact of such networked initiatives such as Excellence in Cities, Education Action Zones and Beacon Schools

International accounts and evaluations of networks
Traditionally North American in origin, but increasingly, research emerging from Europe and elsewhere

Participant accounts and evaluations of networks
These accounts offer the perspectives of key stakeholders, including individual teachers

Multi-agency and community-based forms of networking
Studies ranging from national evaluations to local accounts and covering multi-agency work and partnerships involving schools in collaboration with statutory agencies and community-based organisations

International accounts

Categories of initiatives included

North American
Much of the international literature focuses on North American networks. It encompasses national initiatives such as the Citywide after-school initiative and the Annenberg Challenge projects, district-based initiatives such as the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC), the British Columbia Network of Performance Based Schools, the New York City District #2 networks, and professional initiatives such as the National Writing Project.

European
There is increasing interest in education networks in Europe, ranging from trans-national projects such as the Comenius partnership programme, to national initiatives that have been set up in the Netherlands, Portugal, Germany, France and elsewhere.

Other
We have only considered some of the evidence that is beginning to emerge from networks in countries such as Pakistan, China and South Africa and hope that research from these places will continue to be made more widely available.

Nature of the data

The range of the data has underlined the importance of context, as the literature addresses the impact of networks in a range of education systems, nations and cultures. However, this means that we may be comparing networks operating in very different circumstances. For example, in the United States the emphasis tends to be on professional learning communities rather than networked learning. Furthermore, the overwhelming concentration in the literature on North American and European initiatives potentially obscures stories emerging from other continents. The tendency seen elsewhere towards descriptive or prescriptive accounts of networks, rather than evaluations of impact, is also evident in the international literature.

Do networks have an impact?

Pupils: attainment

- **Overall improvement for pupils in schools**
  'In the aggregate, BASRC Leadership schools made greater gains than the comparison group over all four years that SAT-9 was administered. Moreover, BASRC schools serving large populations of high-poverty students consistently did better on this standardised assessment than did similar schools in the region.' (IN3)

  'There is also evidence of significant positive effects on both authentic student achievement and standardised test scores in a major federal study of professional learning communities from the University of Wisconsin's Center on Restructuring Schools.' (IN23)

- **Specific gains in attainment for certain groups of pupils**

  In the British Columbia network during 2003-04, '17 per cent fewer students in grade 8 and 42 per cent fewer students in grade 9 were in the "not yet" category of reading performance.' (IN11)

  'There have also been significant attainment gains for some underachieving groups in the BASRC project.' (IN3)

Pupils: achievement

  There was no direct evidence of impacts on pupils' achievement.

Pupils: attitudinal

- **Improved confidence as independent learners**

  'When surveyed, 84 per cent of participating teachers strongly agreed that the Elementary School Professional Development Program led to valued learning experiences for their students. Chicago comprehensive community initiative program.' (IN10)

  'The Comenius project evaluation also suggests that trans-national networks promote teamwork and autonomous learning.' (IN5)

Teachers and other professionals: practices

- **Improved teaching practice**

  '95 per cent of teachers at the high school either strongly agreed (56 per cent) or agreed (39 per cent) that the High School Professional Development Initiative improved classroom instruction.' (Chicago schools, IN10)

'There is further evidence of networks motivating teachers to challenge existing practices and to grow professionally (IN15), as well as exchanging experiences and learning.' (Dutch school networks, IN25)

Teachers/other professionals: enhanced skills and knowledge

- **Increased involvement in their own learning**

  'Teacher learning here becomes multi-faceted. Teachers are learning by presenting their own practice, by listening to others, by reading and discussing research and literature together, by being in a group, by taking responsibility for the group's needs, and by taking risks together. In short, they are learning how to be members of a democratic community that values them, their knowledge and their continued growth.' (National Writing Project, IN17)

Teachers and other professionals: attitudinal

- **Participant learning**

  'We found that these networks were attempting to shift the meaning of adult learning away from prescription towards challenging involvement and problem solving. They tried to achieve goals of participant learning and professional competence by modelling different modes of inquiry, supporting the formation of teams to create and write school-based plans for change, finding mechanisms to encourage cross-role groups to work together, focusing deeply on particular topics, and inviting the participants to help shape the agenda in their own terms.' (Study of 16 US educational reform networks, IN14)

  'There is also evidence of active participant learning from Dutch networks.' (IN24)

- **Increased self-reflection on practice**

  'Thanks to a better understanding of other educational systems – and the interesting features they may have – many teachers have become interested in issues related to evaluation and self-evaluation.' (Comenius, IN5)

- **Increased staff morale**

  'There is other research to suggest that authentic learning communities may act as a partial buffer against the conditions that cause people to leave the profession early.' (IN23)

Teachers and other professionals: relationships

- **Overcoming sense of professional isolation**

  'MAP [Mathematics Association of Pakistan] has created such a culture where both the active members of MAP and fellow colleagues share their professional knowledge and concerns in a very open and candid manner. […] This is in sharp contrast with a culture where alternative suggestions are not listened to and valued; this is often observed in the discourse of education in this country.' (IN1)

  'Similar evidence has emerged from the New York District #2 network (I6) and the European school networks in Portugal, Germany and France highlighted by OECD.' (IN9 & IN22)

Leadership

- **Development of new leadership opportunities**

  'Although each of the networks we studied had a formal leader, there were numerous opportunities for members to take leadership roles. They could do this formally – as site co-ordinators, regional directors, partnership associates, and network co-ordinators, or informally – as teacher scholars, proposal writers, organisers, and experts in newly acquired knowledge.' (IN14)

  'Similar models of shared, team leadership have come out of the British Columbia school network (IN11) and the Annenberg network of schools.' (IN27)

- **Overcoming isolation**

  'The biggest strength I see [in the network] is that there's a bond that would not have been there and the sharing that would not have been there. What has happened in Chicago of late is an increase in isolation… there is almost a sense of competition to survive. The network, I think, saved us from that and at the same time helped us get through some very difficult times.' (IN10)

- **Leadership of inquiry**

  'BASRC's theory of school change implied that principals' roles would move away from instructional leadership that rested on formal authority in the district hierarchy to a practice that can be characterised as leadership of inquiry—asking questions, exploring data, and engaging faculty and the broader community in questions that moved their schools forward.' (IN3)

Local community members, parents

- **Collaboration with local community**

  There is evidence from the EU Comenius project (IN7) and the US Citywide after school initiative (I8) that schools have become more open and co-operative with the local community.

Organisational: structures

- **Broader curriculum offerings**

  'BASRC Leadership schools affirm the power of evidence-based strategies for changing school workplace culture and provide strong support for the claim that teachers and administrators need evidence about school-level patterns of performance in order to consider such fundamental issues as curriculum choice, resource allocation, and strategies for change.' (IN3)

  There is also evidence of impressive curriculum innovation coming out of professional communities in US urban schools. (IN19)

Organisational: culture

- **Establishing evidence-based inquiry approaches**

  'BASRC's Phase One experience shows that it is possible to change school culture in significant ways but that changed norms and practices may be fragile. It also points out that the problems of implementing and sustaining evidence-based inquiry are not just technical ones, but also social and cultural issues.' (IN3)

  'There are also accounts of the difficulties of reconciling individualism (US) and collectivism especially for countries emerging from authoritarian regimes eg China, Czech Republic.' (IN23)

Organisational: policy

- **Impact on local and regional policy**

  'Although a precise assessment of the impact of innovation networks is limited by lack of empirical evidence, it can safely be assumed that they are a vibrant, powerful force for the dissemination of innovative educational practices among principals and teachers in different schools… Networks can thus represent vibrant motors of change in education.' (IN22)

  'Along with the Dutch networks examined by Veugelers and Zjilstra (IN25), the Portuguese Good Hope programme, Durham District School Board in Canada, German Network of Innovative Schools and French Observatory networks have been highlighted for their influence on policy.' (IN9, see also IN12)

Organisational: capacity building

There was no direct evidence of impacts on organisational capacity building.

System

- **Commitment to urban community**

  'UNITE [Urban Network for the Improvement of Teacher Education] has become a powerful alternative to working through the established but isolated systems of their home institutions …Through the network, partnerships that struggle with the promise and challenge of education in an urban context renew and affirm a shared commitment to the redesign of teacher preparation and induction that is based on an understanding and commitment to the urban communities they serve.' (IN2)

How have networks achieved this impact?

Leadership

- **Distributed leadership**

  '[Networks] provide a multi-agency vehicle for reform that has the potential to be more supportive, co-operative, less costly and less disruptive than much of the wide-scale structural change of the past. Networks provide an opportunity for shared and dispersed leadership and responsibility, drawing on resources in the community beyond members of the education profession. In so doing they can provide a more cost effective, community-based reform strategy. Networks can be capacity building, in so far as they are able to produce new knowledge and mutual learnings that can then feed back and inform public policy.' (IN4)

- **Strategic approach to professional development**

  'Our review of the literature leads us to conclude that the field is oddly discontinuous; while we were able to locate many projects that offered teachers opportunities to learn, few such projects had yet completed analyses of what professional knowledge was acquired in those communities of learners.' (IN26)

Processes and structures

- **Dedicated structure and processes**

  'What are needed, however, are not outmoded institutions but more creative and responsive structures for working with and between schools.' (IN9)

- **Establishing inquiry and evidence-based processes**

  'When inquiry became part of a school's culture, the audience, scope, and purpose of data collection and analysis changed. Teachers came to see evidence and inquiry as theirs, undertaken to inform their practice – rather than a once-a-year compliance activity.' (BASRC, IN3)

Resources

  There was no direct evidence of how resources have been used.

Values and cultural

- **Shared ownership**

  'Importance for sustainable networks of 'shared ownership and a sense of belonging among all participants'. (IN25)

- **Collaboration**

  'Schools, as they are currently organised, do not give people many opportunities to work collaboratively; networks, almost always, expect participants to collaborate… They provide authentic examples of professional community built around shared work, shared interest, and shared struggle.' (IN14)

- **Trust**

  'Teachers' learning communities are different from other gatherings of teachers. Grossman, Wineberg and Woolworth (2000) say there are three things that are important in a community of learners: commitment to colleagues' growth; recognition that participation is expected for all; and recognition that colleagues are resources for learning. This type of thinking about learning places teachers at the centre of their own learning and the responsibility for learning firmly in their court.' (IN20)

- **Flexibility**

  'Because networks are a more flexible organisational form, they offer new ways of operating that can embrace the processes of teaching, learning and leading as they really are – ambiguous, complex, unfinished – and thus tend to be more in tune with how school professionals live and view their lives.' (IN13)

  'However, there is also paradoxical evidence that, once they have created a flexible network, participants value it for the structure they have built together.' (IN25)

- **Personal ownership of network by individuals**

  'Often what makes networks special to their members are the norms, activities, and relationships that allow people to feel that they have had a significant part in shaping the work. Personal identification with and commitment to the network's purposes, and to one's own professional development, are the defining characteristics of successful networks.' (IN14)

Values and cultural

- **Buy-in and ownership**
  'Participation in the network involves seeing oneself as a key participant. Therefore, the joint project in the network has motivated teachers to work on certain issues, such as developing action research, becoming more aware of some issues that should be considered, etc, even though the teachers' level of involvement does vary. (IN21)

- **Shared and explicit values**

  'Teachers and administrators credited the external partnerships with providing an organising set of values and principles together with specific resources for improvement, including: coaching in the development of school-wide change strategies and inquiry processes; professional development opportunities focused on reform leadership; assistance in the collection and interpretation of school-level data on student performance; and regional network meetings for school-based teams.' (IN18)

Conclusion

It is perhaps not surprising that the explosion of interest in networked-based initiatives in education over recent years has led to a great deal of activity and assertion about the potential of networking and collaboration, but much less substantiation of their effects. The implications of this review are that the evidence of impact is still very patchy across all four areas of the review and while we have found examples of improvements in areas such as pupil attainment, teacher motivation and leadership capacity in networks, there has not yet been sufficient research to enable us to be more conclusive.

Our intention is for this review to function as a preliminary synthesis of the literature on networking and collaboration and to encourage further research to be undertaken on impact. In our own work, the first stage of this is the more comprehensive, systematic review of the literature around networks in education which we are currently undertaking in partnership with CUREE and which will be published in December 2005.

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Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other   learning with each other   learning on behalf of each other