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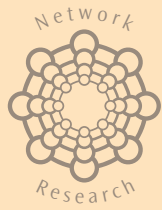**National College for School Leadership**

Network Research

The impact of networking and collaboration: the existing knowledge base

A review of multi-agency and community-based forms of networking

innovation

Network Research

Research

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.
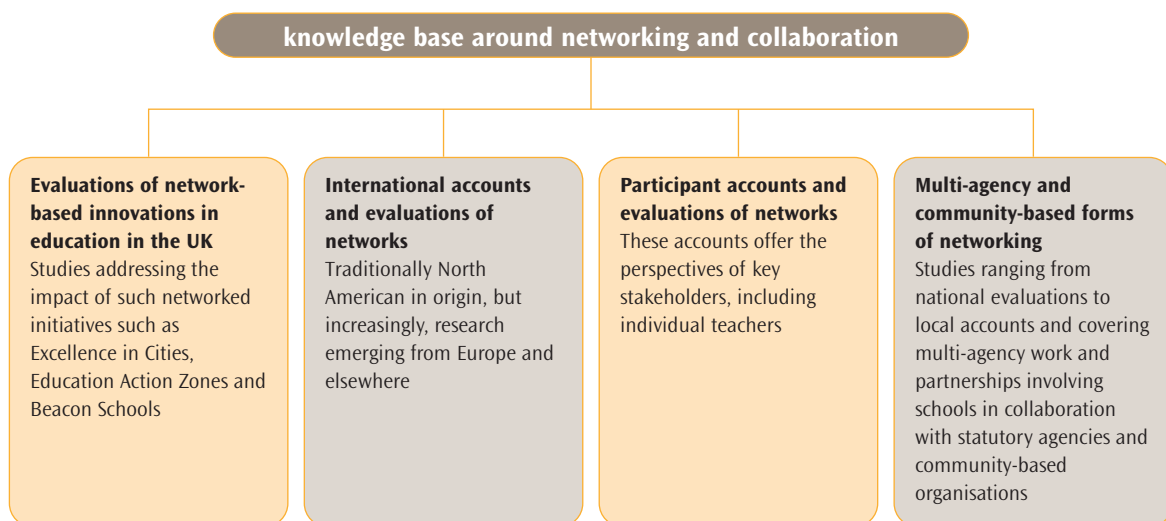
Currently, over half the schools in the UK are involved in centrally-funded network based initiatives. These range from the Leading Edge Partnership Programme, Primary Strategy Learning Networks and Education Improvement Partnerships to school-to-school programmes such as Excellence in Cities, Federations, 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	**International accounts and evaluations of networks**	**Participant accounts and evaluations of networks**	**Multi-agency and community-based forms of networking**
Studies addressing the impact of such networked initiatives such as Excellence in Cities, Education Action Zones and Beacon Schools	Traditionally North American in origin, but increasingly, research emerging from Europe and elsewhere	These accounts offer the perspectives of key stakeholders, including individual teachers	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

Multi-agency and community-based forms of networking

Categories of initiatives included

As well as incorporating a general, empirical study of multi-agency working undertaken by the National Foundation for Education Research (NFER), the literature includes evaluations of national multi-agency and community-based initiatives including extended schools, Schools Plus Teams and New Community Schools (Scotland), Children's Fund On Track, and Local Strategic Partnerships. Other sources address the contribution of multi-agency and community-based networks to broader regeneration issues. In the review we have only included multi-agency and community-based networks that involve or relate to education.

Nature of the data

There is a wide body of literature relating to multi-agency work and collaborative partnerships involving schools in collaboration with statutory agencies and community-based organisations. In the wake of *Every Child Matters*, government policy is increasing its emphasis on the importance of joined-up working: 'people no longer questioning whether partnerships are important, rather focusing on how best to make them work … recognition by statutory, voluntary and private sectors that action by one organisation will have a knock-on effect on the other and the importance of a whole systems approach to best meet the needs of users and carers'[1].

However, evaluations of multi-agency initiatives also tend to focus on the direct outcomes of an intervention, with discussion of the impact of multi-professional involvement being more limited.

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[1] Banks, P (2001) Partnerships under Pressure: a commentary on progress in partnership working between the NHS and local government. London: King's Fund

Do multi-agency and community-based forms of networking have an impact?

Pupils: attainment

- **Increased attainment in targeted areas**

  'In some cases, it was possible to identify direct outcomes from projects in terms of improved pupil attainments … the school which was the focus of the LEA 21 project ran a series of arts-based activities and saw its GCSE A*- C results rise from 63 per cent to 77 per cent in art, from 50 per cent to 75 per cent in music and from 64 per cent to 81 per cent in drama.' (MA8)

- **General and unspecified increases in pupil attainment**

  'A wide range of direct benefits of working in a multi-agency way was identified for children and their families. These centred on three main areas: improved services, direct outcomes, and prevention. Improved access to services was commonly highlighted, as well as an improvement in children's educational attainment and their access to education'. (MA3)

  'Similar statements about improved pupil attainment were made as a result of extended schools pathfinder projects (MA8), extended schools (MA14) and new community schools (MA11), particularly as a result of removing barriers to education.' (MA14)

Pupils: achievement

- **Improved attendance and behaviour**

  '… direct effects on children that were noted by interviewees included improved behaviour, increased self-esteem or confidence and improved motivation.' (MA3)

  Schools involved in: '… a wide range of activities which had the potential to engage families and communities in learning, to enlist their support for the education of students, to motivate disaffected students and to develop employability skills that were not restricted simply to academic attainments.' (MA7) (MA4)

  'A similar statement about the importance of parental involvement was made relating to effective schools in disadvantaged areas. National Commission on Education, 1996, Success against the odds: Effective schools in disadvantaged areas, Routledge, London.' (MA4)

  'Improved attendance was cited as an outcome of Extended schools (MA14) as was a reduced risk of exclusion from school, also described as a result of New Community schools in Scotland (MA11). Relationships between schools and pre-schools resulted in improved attainment as a result of liaison about individual pupils' development and needs.' (MA4)

- **Improved emotional and social well-being**

  'On Track interventions were linked with improved behaviour and enhanced emotional and social well-being, including improved relationships with parents and other adults.' (MA2)

Pupils: attitudinal

- **Improved self-esteem and confidence**

  '… a more positive culture of learning in the school based on encouragement and motivation through the inclusion of extended activities. The provision of facilities that pupils could excel in, or even just enjoy, was deemed to have major implications for raising self-esteem and confidence which could impact on curriculum-related outcomes.' (MA14)

Teachers and other professionals: practices

- **Developing multi-agency and collaborative practices**

  ' … understanding, eg raised awareness of how other agencies worked and raised awareness of the issues; interactions with other professionals, eg meeting different professionals and enhanced or new working relationships, professional practice, eg experience or learning how to engage in multi-agency working.' (MA3)

Teachers and other professionals: enhanced skills and knowledge

- **Knowledge of other agencies and services and skills working across professional boundaries**

  'Easier and speedier access to services was reported for a variety of reasons. These included professionals having a better understanding of the systems of other agencies, individuals knowing who to contact within other agencies, raised awareness of what other agencies could offer, and improved relationships between agencies.' (MA3)

  'Similar professional gains were identified as resulting from the On Track programme.' (MA2)

- **Sharing knowledge and skills across professions**

  'In one initiative, for example, by working alongside teachers, speech and language therapists … were able to pass on their skills to teachers, who were then able to apply them in their work with all children.' (MA3)

Teachers and other professionals: attitudinal

- **Recognition of benefits of multi-agency working**

  'It is arguable that the project's most significant legacy does not lie in the specific activities developed to date, but in the changed attitudes of staff, which will enable further such developments in the future. The fact that the project has opened the eyes of key members of staff in every participating school to "the bigger picture" in terms of potential local partners and new ways of working is likely to have some effect on the way that each of these schools develops in years to come.' (MA12)

  '… helped education professionals recognise that a focus solely on education with disengaged children was unlikely to be effective. Similarly … to highlight to social workers the need to think constantly about education when considering the placement of children.' (MA3)

- **Recognition of complexity of needs**

  'One service provider commented, to the agreement of others… "If each agency looks separately at a child – then the child doesn't meet the threshold. We need to look across agencies and build up a picture of complex needs and recognise that lower levels of need build up to something more complex" … a focus on multi-agency collaboration was moving service providers towards a more coherent focus on children's well-being.' (MA10)

- **Enhanced self efficacy, confidence, morale**

  '… the increase and diversification of opportunities and activities available to teachers that was consistent with (extended schools) served to boost morale. Involvement of the community and the opportunity to work with a wider range of people was deemed beneficial … In a similar way, it was suggested that the consolidation of the school's role, identity and reputation, within the community could impact positively on team spirit and cohesion of staff, so raising morale. Morale could also be boosted via the support available from other agency involvement as specialists could be accessed to address particular issues, relieving teachers of some pressures.' (MA14)

  'This was also raised in terms of multi-agency initiatives generally.' (MA3)

Teachers and other professionals: relationships

- **Opportunities to meet and work with professionals from other agencies**

  'Many interviewees talked about the benefits of simply having the opportunity of meeting with professionals from different agencies. Face-to-face contact, getting to know individuals and being able to 'put a face to a name' were all felt to be beneficial … in some cases it was reported to have led to other 'spin-offs', such as incorporating new ideas into practice.' (MA3) Extended schools were also identified as enabling teachers to become more involved in a wider range of activities within the school and community.' (MA14)

  'Simply bringing the partners together is seen as a benefit. In some areas there had not previously been a mechanism for bringing the sectors together, in others it appears that LSPs [local strategic partnerships] have widened the scope of partnership working to individuals and organisations not previously involved …There is also evidence of enthusiasm, energy, joint ownership and commitment.' (MA1) (MA3)

Leadership

- **Development of new opportunities for leadership**

  'During the pilot year, some of the schools used [Schools Plus] project funding to free-up some staff time, or create new posts which included a remit to develop or co-ordinate Schools Plus work within school, thus creating additional capacity during the lifetime of the pilot project …' (MA12)

  'This individual co-ordination role was sometimes then supplemented by the development of broader leadership opportunities: 'As On Track has expanded, internal co-ordination has become increasingly challenging, particularly for those operating with contracted out models of delivery … As teams have expanded and increasingly moved toward delivering multiple interventions, maintaining co-ordination within On Track teams, and with linked agencies has mostly proved beyond the remit of a single individual.' (MA9)

  Although not often stated explicitly as an impact, there was evidence within the literature that forming multi-agency partnerships, particularly in the service of specific interventions including On Track, Children's Fund, extended schools, and Schools Plus often involved the appointment of a 'co-ordinator' who acted as a 'hub' for the multi-agency working.

Local community members, parents

- **Increased parental involvement and engagement**

  'Attendance at special events, such as Christmas concerts, had increased substantially over the last few years as had attendance at parents' evenings, and responses to letters and questionnaires sent to parents … "before the implementation of the Extended school approach, parents had been, at best, apathetic to involvement with the school" (headteacher, primary). The numbers of parents willing to become involved as volunteers was also seen as a positive impact of the development of an extended approach, as opposed to the situation where one primary school headteacher reported "two years ago they were slagging us off".' (MA14; also MA4)

  'An Extended school approach provided parents with increased opportunities and environments for the development of their own skills and abilities. One primary headteacher, for example, suggested that one of the main impacts of this approach was that "we've demystified a great deal of the education process", allowing parents "a second chance at education".' (MA14)

  'Similarly positive effects on parents' perceptions of themselves as learners were reported in the Extended Schools pathfinder project evaluation.' (MA8)

- **Increased community involvement by schools**

  'The extended school approach was believed to impact positively on the community by providing a focus and a dynamic base to which other organisations may become affiliated.' (MA14)

- **Crime reduction, respect for the law**

  'Another project explained that police presence in schools and police involvement in school crime reduction programmes had not only reduced levels of juvenile crime in the school holidays, but had resulted in a growing respect for the law.' (M8)

  'Within On Track there was speculation about reductions in crime levels: '…activities were often felt to keep children 'off the streets', keep them more purposefully engaged and meant that they were less likely to be roaming the area unsupervised.' (MA2)

  'Within On Track, outcomes for parents and families were identified in terms of parental well-being, confidence and self-esteem, decreased stress, improved relationships within the family. With schools, increased access to services and an ability to articulate and cope with multiple needs were identified as outcomes.' (MA2)

- **Improved community self-perception**

  '[one] project seems to have had an impact on community self-perception. It involved locating community agencies on a school site and was undertaken very much at the instigation of the local community and with their full involvement. Although the project was still some way from delivery, testimony from community members suggested that, even at this early stage, this had positive benefits for both the school and the community. Numbers on the school roll ceased to decline and its nursery was full.' (MA8)

Organisational: structures

- **New collaborative interventions**

  'By pooling expertise and focusing agencies on the target group … it would appear that needs can be flagged up earlier, as well as being addressed more appropriately. This was reported to lead to benefits for agencies … since problems were tackled before they became entrenched and more difficult to address … linked to this, in both these types of initiatives, multi-agency intervention was reported to prevent the need for access to more specialist services, or out-of-county services.' (MA2)

- **Joint curriculum development**

  'Curricular developments were noted in mental health, personal social development, alternatives to exclusion, healthy eating and alternative curriculum for disenchanted young people.' (MA11)

- **Extended school provision**

  'Out-of-school and additional activities reported included transition programmes, breakfast clubs, homework initiatives, successful holiday activity programmes.' (MA11)

- **Improved transition procedures**

  'Relationships between schools and pre-schools resulting in smoother transition to school, continuity of learning.' DFEE,1997, Progress with partnerships. Early years network, London, cited in (MA4)

  'Taking a long-term view, probably the most significant feature of the SPT project was its role in extending schools' external contacts, networks and partnerships. Most of schools' new links and networks can be directly attributed to the project, and more specifically, to the input of the team leader. In many cases local partners were engaged that the schools had no prior knowledge of. Often these new links provided access – directly or indirectly – to sources of funding for Schools Plus activities.' (MA12)

Organisational: culture

- **Establishing broader vision of schools' role in the community**

  '"What the project has done has given us a broader vision to develop the school as a community school, and not serving just my old parents, but parents from a broader community – the grandparents and parents from other schools as well will be able to utilise these facilities".' (MA12)

- **Increased responsiveness to local need**

  '"I think what the Children's Fund has done quite effectively has changed or bent the culture, particularly of our statutory partners to be more inclusive, less bureaucratic, more responsive to local need".' (MA10)

Organisational: policy

'There were no direct reports of changes to organisational policies as a result of multi-agency or community-based networking, although there are multiple examples of changed structures and attitudes, for example in the case of LSPs [local strategic partnerships] which are said to be starting 'to act as a catalyst for mapping and rationalising existing partnership activity', and to 'make sense of the plethora of partnerships and plans.' (MA1)

Organisational: capacity building

- **Understanding within agencies, eg a broad perspective or focus and improved understanding and knowledge of other agencies**

  'A wide range of direct benefits of working in a multi-agency way was identified for children and their families. These centred on three main areas: improved services, direct outcomes and prevention. Improved access to services was commonly highlighted, as well as an improvement in children's educational attainment and their access to education.' (MA3)

  'Similarly, a school with input from a broad range of partner services was deemed to be in a strong position to broaden its curriculum and offer vocational courses in order to encourage increased attendance.' (MA14)

  '"[Local Authority officer]' knowledge of what the school is doing has certainly been instrumental in helping us to obtain additional funding both from the Children's Fund and from the Extended Schools Pathfinder project … I think the school is established within the authority as being one of those schools that has a clear vision about how community education should develop".' (MA12)

- **Interactions between agencies, eg improved relationships and shared responsibility**

  ' … schools' links with external agencies in a more general sense. In some instances this involved developing and nurturing completely new relationships. In others it meant closer working with existing contacts, for example, within the Local Authority. Often the Schools Plus Teams (SPT) pilot project took schools into completely uncharted territory, and in many such cases, tangible benefits of such networking have yet to become apparent; the nascent relationship should perhaps be regarded as an end in itself. In other instances the rewards (financial in many cases) of targeted networking have been delivered rapidly, and have proved to be significant factors in the project's development locally.' (MA12)

- **Agency practices, eg access to other services or expertise and early identification and intervention**

  'While it has not always been easy for learning from the operational level to travel upwards to inform local policy communities, we have certainly seen considerable learning on the part of service providers in all six partnerships. The partnerships have each had different starting points and five of them were able offer examples of a focus on the development of multi-agency working as the first step towards meeting on the complex needs of children, young people and their families at risk of social exclusion.' (MA10)

- **Extension to other areas of work, eg highlighted the value of joint working and increased joint working in other areas**

  'Service providers reported that Sure Start had created or enhanced the conditions for collaborative working. The ward was, therefore, fertile ground for the Children's Fund to further develop multi-agency working. For instance, the local library was already linked into Sure Start networks through such projects as Book Start.' (MA10)

- **Improved access to additional resources**

  'Evidence suggests that once a partnership or close working relationship between a school and an agency, network or initiative has been established, and initial pieces of joint working have been accomplished, then additional benefits are likely to accrue in the future. Benefits and funding that may not be accessible to schools in their own right, can be gained through such joint working.' (MA12)

System

- **Improved inter-agency relationships**

  'Good relationships had been established between Jobcentre Plus and the Local Authority in each area. They tended to be very positive and supportive of one another.' (MA6)

  'Interviews with service providers pointed to various ways in which the innovative working methods adopted by On Track teams had provided a good role model and contributed positively to the culture of partnership working in their locality.' (MA9)

- **A network of distributed expertise**

  ' "What we very quickly realised…is that we couldn't meet all the needs of every child and every family so what we had to be able to do was to at least find access to people who could do that: either provide the support or provide the service or provide the wherewithal for the family and the children for what it was that they needed (service provider)".' (MA10)

  '… where we saw successful multi-agency collaboration it was a matter of working across professional boundaries. That is, it did not involve an erosion of expertise. Indeed the reverse occurred, as there was a growing recognition of the expertise that was distributed across the system. The Children's Fund networks enabled practitioners to access that expertise.' (MA10)

- **Improved cross-agency procedures and systems**

  'Some projects had tangible outputs in terms of producing guidance, developing new facilities, training staff or setting up new structures and processes …Some projects established new sets of working relationships between professionals, agencies and community organisations'. (MA8)

  'Moves towards enhanced multi-agency practices included agencies exchanging information about children and making cross-referrals, providers working together to achieve common preventative objectives, co-location of services in schools and agencies providing training for each other.' (MA10)

- **Increased provision, improved or more appropriate services**

  'Increased knowledge of educational processes by social workers, for example, was felt to have enabled them to secure more educational provision for children and to save time in trying to find out who was responsible for providing education for them. Understanding the roles of different professionals and the constraints and the difficulties of other agencies meant that expectations were more realistic.' (MA3)

  'Increased support and provision for vulnerable children and families was also seen in relation to New Community schools.' (MA11)

  'Multi-agency working is a necessary element in the development of responsive child-centred preventative services. The demands for change in professional practices are considerable and need to be backed by a systemic response in Local Authorities and the voluntary sector.' (MA10)

  'Impact on Local Authority 'The most frequently cited positive impact of Extended schools was improved service management and co-ordination. Extended schools were associated with the development of a more coherent approach to managing children's services.' (MA14)

- **Effective use of resources and facilities**

  'Some of the schools have found that networking and partnership working brought direct benefits to the delivery of their programmes, for example, in-kind support from the FE college in terms of staff time and the loan of IT equipment for family learning activities.' (MA12)

  'On Track was reported to have reduced the amount of replication between different service providers and developed stronger inter-agency links … The breaking down of agency roles and professional identities was reported positively within the programme, particularly by users, where services were focusing on meeting their need as opposed to sustaining providers' 'traditional' roles and responsibilities.' (MA2)

How have networks achieved this impact?

Leadership

- **New leadership roles**

  'The role of an individual co-ordinator in establishing and maintaining the multi-agency activity was seen as vital within Children's Fund.' (MA10)

- **Effective middle leadership**

  'The extensive prior experience of the team leaders was an important factor not only in their ability actually to undertake the tasks required of them, but crucially in gaining the credibility and confidence of schools and other partners at the outset.' (MA12)

- **Senior management buy-in**

  'Leadership was noted by eight interviewees as an important issue regarding Extended school delivery. Headteachers were seen as playing vital roles in motivating, inspiring and supporting their staff to participate in, and commit to, the ideals of this approach, such as multi-agency working and the sharing of resources. Headteachers were thus regarded as having a pivotal role …' (MA14)

- **Distributed leadership and new leadership opportunities**

  'Several areas have also introduced an additional tier of smaller, more targeted groups focusing on specific issues. In Area F such targeted groupings have replaced the original operational management support group. It is at this level that service users are beginning to make a direct contribution, for example in Area F the Children and Family sub-group is made up of 50 per cent professionals and 50 per cent residents and is a consultation body for all children and family issues in the locality.' (MA9)

- **Leadership modelling appropriate behaviour**

  'The challenge of operationalising partnership working required a relatively high level of appointment. The status of the co-ordinator or manager was significant and management experience vital. Strong leadership and a commitment from the top to partnership working were seen to be critical: "Often services talk about working in partnership but miss the fundamental principles of what that means. We aim to model those principles whether or not we are talking to families or professionals. Hopefully people will have a sense of how effectively that can work. That it's about negotiation, problem solving and creativity". (On Track co-ordinator)' (MA9)

Processes and structures

- **Consulting locally on need**

  'The commissioning process [in one example] was greatly enhanced by the area co-ordinators who set up area network meetings and focused on knowledge sharing. These meetings encouraged a needs-led rather than service-led approach to collaboration … Providers learnt about what each was offering and were also encouraged to look beyond the Children's Fund to other activities that might be accessed by children and young people.' (MA10)

- **Using existing structures for new processes**

  'In terms of benefits, interviewees (11) commonly considered co-location to be a forerunner to integration: "a starting point" and "a step forward" rather than going for "big bang integration" in the first instance. Some of these interviewees described integration as "a long way off" because of the pressure on teachers and other services and therefore co-location a more realistic aim. This model was reported to give people the chance to expose themselves to each other and to foster the slow process of integration: "they are more likely to talk to each other if they are under one roof".' (MA14)

  'Formal structures such a meetings for service providers set up and led by Children's Fund staff enabled service providers to meet, build mutual trust and develop new networks … Once these relationships had been initiated practitioners were using and developing them to create responsive child-led packages of provision.' (MA10)

  'Children's Fund co-ordinators who had responsibility for either a broad area of activity or for a locality, used Fund structures to enable service providers to learn more about each other. Through the meetings, providers built trust and saw how they might work together to give coherent support to children and young people.' (MA10)

Resources

'Collaboration between practitioners to support the pathways of children and young people was based on explicitness about the particular contributions of each service. That is, there were no signs that multi-agency working led to the development of a generic all-purpose practitioner.' (MA10)

'The programme managers … put considerable energy into building the new relationships of trust between providers that are so necessary for the development of responsive and collaborative resilience-building among children and young people.' (MA10)

Values and culture

'The primary loyalty of many participants to their employing agencies … contributed to some strategic short-termism. There was a strong tendency to see the Children's Fund as "a funding pot" to be accessed. Initially at least, the distribution of funds was seen as the main purpose of the partnership for most Board members and there is evidence that in some authorities it was regarded simply as an opportunity to "bail out" services or as a funding source to be offered to voluntary agencies.' (MA10)

'Service providers reported that Sure Start had created or enhanced the conditions for collaborative working. The ward was, therefore, fertile ground for the Children's Fund to further develop multi-agency working. For instance, the local library was already linked into Sure Start networks through such projects as Book Start.' (MA10)

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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