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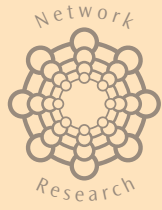
The impact of networking and collaboration: the existing knowledge base

A review of network-based innovations in education in the UK

innovation

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.
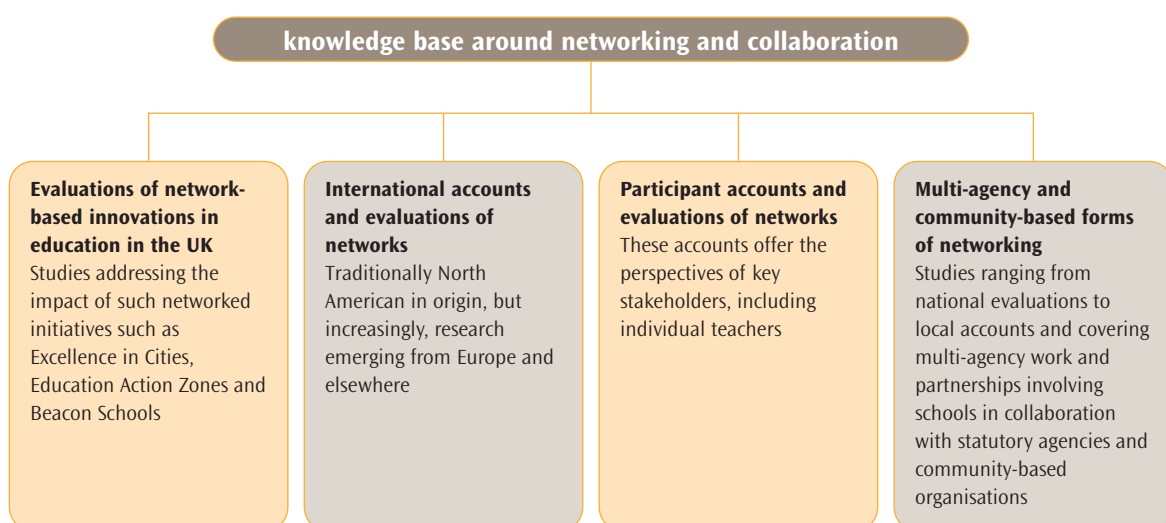
Currently, over half the schools in the UK are involved in centrally-funded network based initiatives. These range from the Leading Edge Partnership Programme, Primary Strategy Learning Networks and Education Improvement Partnerships to school-to-school programmes such as Excellence in Cities, Federations, 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

Network-based innovations in education in the UK

Categories of initiatives included

A range of potential models of network-based collaboration has been created in the UK in recent years. In this review we have looked at the following:

- **Non-specific forms of networking**

  TVEI (Technical and Vocational Education Initiative), Excellence in Cities, Education Action Zones, Beacon schools.

- **Specific networking models**

  Leadership Incentive Grants, Networked Learning Communities, Primary Strategy Learning Networks

- **HEI-based school improvement networks**

  IQEA (Improving the Quality of Education for All)

- **LA-based networks**

  Schools Learning Together (York)

- **School-based networks**

  Bedfordshire School Improvement Partnership (BSIP)

Nature of the data

The breadth of these initiatives has given us a rich evidence-base for comparing the key successes and failures of different approaches to networked collaboration. However, the emphasis in the literature tends to be on outcomes, rather than on the process or impact of networking.

Impact

Impact is defined as affecting personal, social, affective or cognitive development. Reports have been included in this review if they describe a network or networks which have been associated with a positive difference made to:

- **pupils:** in terms of attainment, achievement, attitude

- **teachers:** in terms of practice, skills & knowledge, attitudes, relationships

- **leaders:** in terms of their development), organisations (in terms of their structures, culture, policy, capacity)

- **the wider system:** local authorities, communities beyond the school.

Reports were also included if they identified elements such as structures, processes or other network characteristics which may have contributed to the impact described.

Quotes and data extracts were selected as being generally representative of the impact which the network had made.

Coding

Reports are coded as:

UK   UK based school network initiatives
IN   international (ie non UK) based network initiatives
PA   individual Practitioner Accounts of involvement in school networks
MA   multi-agency networks ie involving partners from both education **and** non-education agencies.

Do networks have an impact?

Pupils: attainment

- **Overall improvement for pupils in underperforming schools**

  'In 2002, pupils in EiC schools were making less progress than similar pupils in both Phase 1 and Phase 2 comparison schools… The progress gap that existed in 2002 had vanished by 2003…This could be seen as a very positive result for the EiC primary pilot.' (UK24)

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

  'In 2002 in all groups, it was found that black pupils had made significantly less progress than similar white pupils. In 2003, this pattern was continued within the various comparison schools but was not evident within EiC schools. Another way of looking at this data is to see that in 2003 black pupils in EiC schools achieved better results than similar pupils in other schools. It may be, therefore, that the EiC initiative at primary level is particularly beneficial to black pupils.' (UK24)

  'Within EiCs two key strategies: the Gifted and Talented Strand and the Learning Mentor Strand have demonstrated positive impacts upon pupil attainment.' (UK13)

- **Evidence of phase differences in pupil improvement rates**

  'EAZs have impacted upon reading, writing and maths at KS1. At the primary level, some individual EAZs have shown much greater improvement than others. The success at primary level has yet to be demonstrated in the secondary sector. The most noticeable improvement has occurred in the area of those pupils who previously gained no passes at GCSE or GNVQ.' (UK8)

Pupils: achievement

- **Improved attendance and fewer exclusions of vulnerable pupils**

  'The programmes are helping schools and teachers to meet the needs of disaffected and vulnerable pupils more effectively. The number of exclusions is being reduced and attendance is improving at a faster rate in the schools benefiting from this funding than in the nation as a whole.' (UK19)

- **Pupils have developed new learning strategies**

  'One group of pupils said that working in partnership with other schools had helped them to learn because other pupils had different experiences, systems and ways of learning and, because they were the same age, were easier to talk to. As one pupil said, "you can give ideas to each other".' (UK13)

Pupils: attitudinal

- **Improved aspirations, confidence and self-esteem**

  'Excellence in Cities and Education Action Zone programmes are making an important difference to schools in disadvantaged areas. They are providing pupils with a broader range of opportunities and helping to raise their aspirations, confidence and self-esteem.' (UK19)

- **Improved attitudes towards school by targeted groups of pupils**

  'Amongst students who reported having very few books in the home, those students in EiC schools had better attitudes to teachers and to their schools than similar pupils in other schools. Amongst pupils with low prior attainment, those pupils attending EiC schools had greater confidence in their abilities than similar students in non-EiC schools.

  In terms of the characteristics that were associated with the greatest EiC-related differences, black pupils, those with no books at home, those with low belief in their academic skills appear to have had particular benefits from being involved in the EiC Primary Pilot.' (UK24)

Teachers and other professionals: practices

- 'Improved classroom practice due to their enhanced ability to draw on local specialists.'

  Features of effective Gifted and Talented provision were:

- 'The sharing of good teaching practice both within and outside the school, for example on learning styles, setting higher expectations, and planning innovative work and challenges'

- (2) 'opportunities for sharing good practice with subject specialists in neighbouring schools' (UK19)

  'Respondents believed that pupils had benefited from the changes to classroom practice, such as the introduction of different teaching and learning styles, which had been developed as a result of their schools' involvement with the NLC. These had included strategies designed to encourage pupils to work together and to facilitate each other's learning.' (UK15)

  'There is also evidence of primary schools collaborating on successful literacy projects in the Excellence in Cities initiative.' (UK13)

Teachers and other professionals: enhanced skills and knowledge

- **Improved teaching strategies**

  'In all but one of the 15 studies on which we based our findings, the collaborative CPD was linked with improvements in both teaching and learning; many of these improvements were substantial.' (UK7)

- **Support in developing innovations and implementing them**

  'Staff in the Beacon schools visited reported positive feedback from partner schools on the impact of the Beacon strand on a greater willingness to try new things on help with the development of ideas, and the formulation and implementation of action plans.' (UK12)

- **Increased awareness of other practices and approaches**

  'Beacon work seems to have acted as a stimulus for reflection amongst the staff' – prompted by visits from people from outside the school and awareness of the circumstances of others.' (UK14)

- **More self-critical approach to their CPD needs**

  'This [working within a NLC] meant moving away from a situation whereby they scanned a brochure for an interesting course or listened to presentations, towards a situation where they made more considered assessments of their needs.' (UK15)

Teachers and other professionals: attitudinal

- **Increased staff morale**

  'Increased staff and student morale" was one of the five main areas of benefit identified by teachers themselves … and this is explained in the report by the positive effects of greater recognition for teachers in Beacon schools. Staff from partner schools are telling us of the positive benefits of working with Beacon schools in terms of increased morale, [and] renewal of enthusiasm.' (UK14)

- **Increased confidence to deal with problems**

  'Examples of perceived impact on partner schools include increased confidence amongst colleagues in partner schools in the classroom, for example, with "trouble-shooting".' (UK12)

- **Increased reflection on practice**

  'A positive impact in terms of facilitating self-reflection. In a general sense, it was felt that any activity that caused teachers to reflect on their own practice had a direct benefit on practice.' (UK12)

  'Professional gains for teachers included a greater capacity for self-questioning and self-criticism, leading to a more informed approach to pupil learning.' (UK6)

- **Improved sense of professionalism**

  'The majority said that it had a major impact on their professional confidence. Several said that it had underlined to them the core values of teaching and learning.' (UK15)

  This is also mentioned as a significant finding in (UK6) and (UK25).

Teachers and other professionals: relationships

- **Joint development of new practices**

  'Co-operation was generally leading to more effective practices than those developed in isolation by individual schools.' (UK15)

- **Overcoming sense of professional isolation within rural schools**

  'Partnership working reduced the sense of professional isolation, especially for staff working in small and rural schools.' (UK27)

- **Support for new teachers**

  'Two newly qualified teachers (NQTs) involved in partnership working also reported that they had gained in confidence… A newly qualified teacher agreed, saying that she had gained in confidence through being linked with an experienced teacher in a partner school. Through her, she had been able to learn, to clarify things, receive explanations and overcome her fears.' (UK13)

Leadership

- **Development of new leadership opportunities**

  'Several respondents said that the NLC had given them a leadership role for the first time. Some referred to individual examples where they felt that their experience within the NLC had taught them to think more strategically and to retain an idea of the big picture.' (UK15)

Leadership: enhancing work of existing leaders

- **Improved ability to manage change**

  'Several of the Local Authorities are using both established and new networks to support senior and middle managers in schools and to influence practice… These networks are valuable, not only because they promote good collaborative working, but also because they are an effective mechanism for sharing good practice and encouraging change.' (UK21)

- **Experimentation with new leadership approaches**

  'Promoting distributed leadership within schools facing challenging circumstances.' (UK5)

Local community members: parents

- **Increased community involvement by schools**

  'In some cases, partnership working had led to increased involvement in the wider community.' (UK27)

Organisational: structures

- **New collaborative interventions to support vulnerable pupils**

  'In well over half the Local Authorities, successful collaboration was leading to particularly effective early intervention strategies to support vulnerable pupils.' (UK19)

- **Enhanced pre-16 vocational educational opportunities**

  'EAZs have enabled some secondary schools to make an appreciable difference to their curriculum in Key Stage 4, particularly through extending links with colleges and local businesses to provide more vocational courses and work-related opportunities for young people.

  Local businesses involved in the programmes have also extended the opportunities they provide to young people. In a number of cases, curriculum projects involving applications to the world of work have been developed.' (UK19)

- **Broader curriculum offerings**

  'Staff reported the 'expansion of a range of curricular activities' due to Beacon partnerships.' (UK12)

  'There were multiple examples of interventions to broaden the curriculum and improvements to the choice available to pupils.' (see UK25, UK30, UK23, UK16, UK2, UK13).

- **Improved range of staff development opportunities**

  'Staff in all of the case-study schools were very positive about the impact of Beacon work on professional development, especially of their own school's staff. One interviewee described the Beacon initiative as "an informal form of INSET".' (UK12)

  'The Specialist School partnerships also gave partner schools opportunities for staff training and for exchanging ideas and good practice with other teachers.' (UK1)

- **Improved targeting of staff development activities**

  'In the best practice seen, co-ordinators identified staff development needs and used the cluster group and network to help to meet them.' (UK17)

- **Improved access to external expertise**

  'Providing a mechanism for Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances (SFCC) to harness external support.' (UK5)

Organisational: culture

There was no direct evidence of impacts on organisational culture.

Organisational: policy

There was no direct evidence of impacts on organisational policy.

Organisational: capacity building

- **Improved utilisation of existing expertise in the locality**

  'Difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified candidates to the posts have led some Local Authorities to innovative solutions. Some of the Local Authorities, for example, are making use of part-time consultancy to employ recently retired headteachers. Where things work well, the co-ordinators are involved in either leading or contributing to various networks, in facilitating links between schools to share expertise, and in building bridges between schools and other providers, including further education.' (UK21)

System

- **Support for schools in special measures**

  'EAZs are also playing a crucial role in supporting schools in special measures. The number of round 1 EAZ schools in special measures has fallen from 42 in August 1998 to 9 at April 2002 – a reduction of over 75 per cent.' (UK8)

- **Improved transition procedures between schools**

  ' "Transition arrangements from the primary schools to the secondary school have been made a lot easier" (head teacher); "partnerships are a very good way of bridging the gap" (teacher).' (UK26)

- **Improved local provision for targeted pupils**

  'Changes have been made through "working with local schools and community organisers to improve area-wide provision and to share expertise".' (UK17)

- **Improved access to local facilities**

  'Schools were able to develop their normal curriculum provision and to have access to facilities not available in their own school.' (UK17)

How have networks achieved this impact?

Leadership

- **Strategic thinking about partnership working**

  'There was evidence that the majority of Beacon schools were capacity building: in other words, they were often looking to the future, looking for ways of sustaining and embedding their work with partners.' (UK12)

- **Congruence between network and school objectives**

  'In the best practice, objectives included distinct learning outcomes and sometimes reflected an articulate approach to social inclusion. Crucially, the objectives fitted the partner schools' own development planning priorities.' (UK18)

Processes and structures

- **Mutual and more equal relationships between network members**

  'On the issue of networks of schools, this year's evaluation was particularly interesting, in that it found that Beacon and partner schools were indeed moving more towards networking models and away from dissemination or customised support models of working. This was due, at least in part, to the continuing rise in two-way relationships based on mutual respect.' (UK12)

- **Dedicated structures and processes for the exchange of practice**

  'Partnership working…meant that there were very useful mechanisms in place for the sharing of good ideas. There was a structure within which you could seek out examples of good practice…or offer new ideas of your own.'

  'The establishment of a network or forum through which teachers could meet to exchange ideas and share good practice.' (UK27)

- **Identified individuals who were responsible for managing networking**

  'Arrangements were made for the partner schools to identify link staff who took on the responsibility for sharing good practice.' (UK18)

Resources

- **Effective use of external expertise, including Local Authority officers**

  'The Local Authorities are also providing good encouragement to schools to work with local further education colleges to enhance their Key Stage 4 provision. Collaboration also enables the schools to offer a more varied and differentiated curriculum.' (UK21)

Values and culture

- **Clear purpose and direction**

  'Working to declared targets, dynamic leadership by key players, a renewed sense of purpose, the willingness to be a pathfinder, targeted use of funding and being part of an optimistic network of like-minded schools all contribute to an impetus and climate for improvement.' (UK18)

- **Commitment to work through early difficulties**

  'Positive outcomes of the impact of collaborative CPD sometimes emerged only after periods of relative discomfort in trying out new approaches; things often got worse before they got better. Collaboration was important in sustaining change.' (UK7)

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