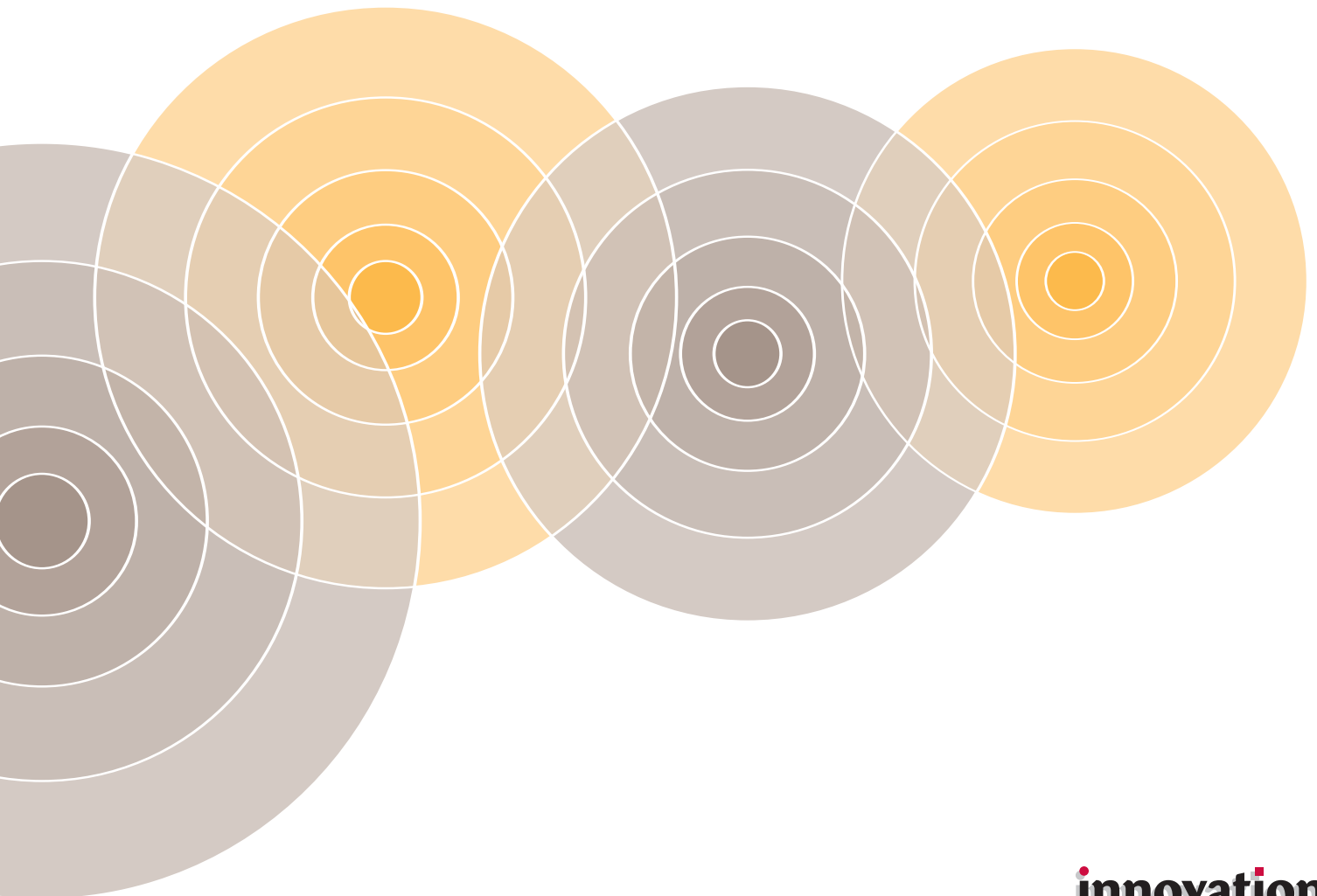


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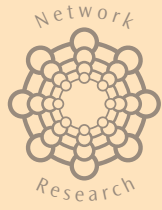


The impact of networking and collaboration: the existing knowledge base

A review of practitioner accounts



innovation



The impact of networking and collaboration: the existing knowledge base

A brief review of the literature

Mark Hadfield, Michael Jopling, Christopher Noden,
Duncan O'Leary and Alison Stott.

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.

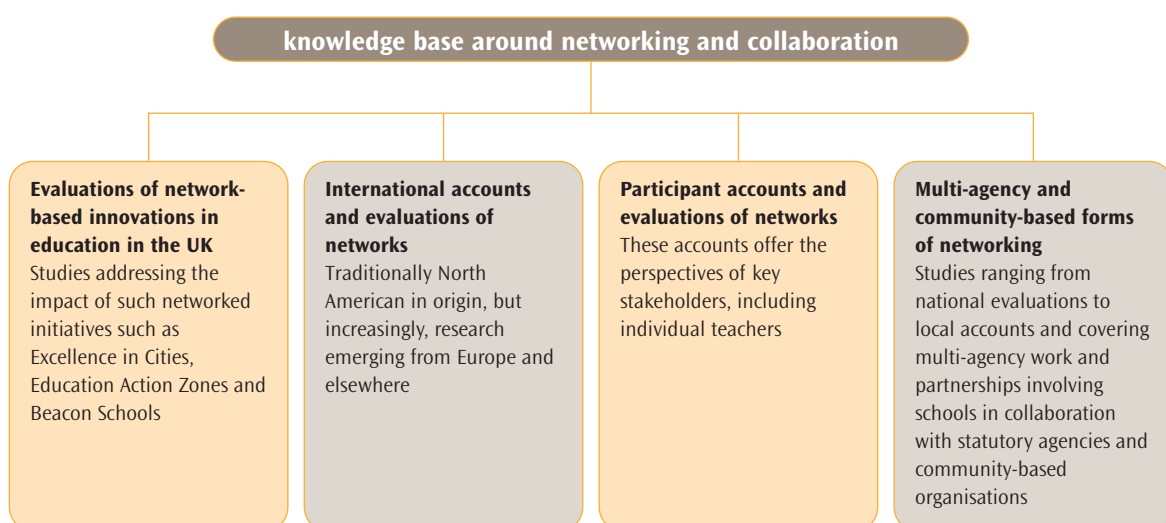
Currently, over half the schools in the UK are involved in centrally-funded network based initiatives. These range from the Leading Edge Partnership Programme, Primary Strategy Learning Networks and Education Improvement Partnerships to school-to-school programmes such as Excellence in Cities, Federations,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



Practitioner accounts

Categories of initiatives included

In this area we looked at accounts by practitioners and academics involved in a variety of networks, ranging from small-scale action research collaboratives to large Education Action Zones.

Nature of the data

As they tend to focus on individual networks, practitioner accounts offer a useful counterpoint to less directly engaged perspectives. They allow us to build up a picture of critical success factors at ground level. However, practitioner accounts are more discursive and tend to focus on process rather than outcomes. Consequently, they tend to be reluctant to generalise or to make explicit connections between their experience and improvements in achievement or attainment.

Do networks have an impact?

Pupils: attainment

- **Overall improvement for pupils in schools**

'The level of academic achievement has risen as a result of learning new practices from the Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs)... [They] saw how others could do it differently, how they could motivate and challenge pupils' learning beyond their capabilities. We have seen great improvement in the number of pupils achieving level 5 or above. It has risen from 32 per cent in 2001 to 48 per cent now (2002-2003).' (PA3)

'Analysis of impact data (attendance and SATs) indicated...those schools with the highest levels of involvement [in the network] were making the most significant gains.' (PA20) Similarly significant improvements were replicated in other areas.' (PA8)

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

'There are examples of a positive impact. For example, one school found that the use of thinking skills at GCSE English had a positive impact, particularly on boys, with pupils achieving grades one or two levels above those predicted.' (PA13)

Pupils: achievement

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

'There was evidence that pupils felt valued and were less likely to display signs of disaffection'... 'evidence that the programme effectively reduced levels of disruption in a school where the programme included disruptive students.' (PA14)

'The numbers of pupils suspended or referred for statements for behaviour problems had decreased markedly since the Special Education Needs [SEN] cluster had been in operation.' (PA15)

'The network allowed children [from small schools] to be taught in same-age groups, often for the first time.' (PA16)

Pupils: attitudinal

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

'In each of our schools, children's self-esteem and confidence in their writing abilities has shown marked improvements.' (PA10)

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

'For example, Year 4 pupils were more likely to say that they enjoyed reading, were making progress and believed their teachers thought they behaved well. Year 6 pupils were more positive about maths, more likely to feel that they had an inherent ability to succeed and more likely to say that their teachers kept them informed of progress.' (PA20)

Teachers and other professionals: practices

- **Improved teaching practice due to their enhanced ability to draw on local specialists**

'There was a shift in focus, when using a thinking for learning approach, from teaching content to facilitated learning, and the quality of lessons was observed to have improved.' (PA13)

'Teachers...engaged in a variety of curriculum development activities that ranged from developing new lessons in established curriculum units to implementing entirely new curricula.' (PA21)

Teachers and other professionals: enhanced skills and knowledge

- **Gains in knowledge through sharing (PA5, PA9, PA11)**

'If you're not researching you're going to get stuck in your ways. If you're not prepared to look at how to change the classroom it will get worse.' (PA9)

Teachers and other professionals: attitudinal

- **Increased staff morale**

‘...evidence also shows that being part of a professional learning community can have a positive impact on teachers’ work lives, their learning and improvement in practice.’ (PA17 and PA5)

‘Teachers [in the action research groups] reported that doing the research had helped them develop more confidence in their ability as teachers.’ (PA21)

‘Learning themes [of the EAZ] include reporting greater self-confidence amongst teachers, schools and inter-school.’ (PA1)

- **Re-engagement with adult learning by teachers (PA5)**

Teachers and other professionals: relationships

- **Enhanced professional dialogue**

‘The main reaction [to the work of the research consortium] was one of enthusiasm... With particular regard to... awakening interest of colleagues and the growth of staffroom discussion about pedagogical issues – a talk culture previously absent.’ (PA8)

Leadership

- **Improved leadership**

‘Two recent Ofsted primary school reviews of Woolwich Reach and Plumstead Pathfinder Action Zone [WRaPP] schools have commented positively on the improvement in leadership and management.’ (PA20)

Local community members, parents

There was no direct evidence of impacts on organisational culture.

Organisational: structures

‘Enhanced mechanisms for carrying out enquiry.’ (PA2)

Organisational: culture

- **Greater willingness to engage with external expertise**

‘HEI and school links within a network can lead to school and individual renewal rather than outright reform.’ (PA2)

- **Ongoing enquiry-based network activity stimulating organisational development**

‘There have been spin-offs all through the school. The teaching is different.’ (PA7)

Organisational: policy

There was no direct evidence of impacts on organisational policy.

Organisational: capacity building

- **Improving HEI research capacity in working with schools**

‘HE personnel, previously locked into formal academic research, came to appreciate the needs of the teacher-researchers and to recognise that the different approach of teachers to research was a viable and useful means to ends similar to their own.’ (PA7)

System

- **Enhanced and improved links with partners**

‘The cluster arrangement enabled services such as support teachers, educational psychologists and health and social services personnel to co-operate more efficiently in providing services to schools and children.’ (PA15)

How have networks achieved this impact?

Leadership

- **Sharing models of leadership**

‘The combination of different sizes of school, different levels of experience with a newly-appointed head in his first headship...and a range of greater experience helps to make it a dynamic partnership.’ (PA12)

- **New leadership opportunities**

‘For the two secondary schools, WRaPP has been a welcome network particularly... providing high-level leadership development opportunities.’ (PA20)

Processes and structures

- **Exchange of learning**

‘Exchange of learning between teachers needs three processes to be supported and encouraged; experiential learning (eg classroom observation), reflective learning (eg joint planning) and support for learning (eg time out of classroom provided by SMT).’ (PA9)

- **Dissemination of evidence**

‘Teacher-led enquiry is most effective when there is a built-in expectation that results will be formally written up and disseminated. The process of dissemination itself leads to the validation of practice.’ (PA9)

- **Structures**

‘Real ‘joining up’ of teachers requires more than simply encouragement. Formal network arrangements are a starting point but structures need careful consideration.

Early stage interviews with zone headteachers indicated a high degree of approval of the consequences of their schools participating in the initiative; an emphasis was frequently placed on the opportunity it was beginning to create for the fostering of new working relations between schools...’ (PA4)

Resources

- **Dedicated time for network activity**

‘Formal network structures lead to the legitimisation of time being allocated for teachers to devote to network activity.’ (P2)

‘Strategic use of staff in a successful EAZ includes allocation of time for planning and discussion, a longitudinal and sustained effort and the extension of teaching repertoires.’ (PA1)

- **Funding and leadership time**

‘Funding devoted to supporting a network and the allocation of specified leadership time to establish its structures are key drivers.’ (PA17)

Values and culture

- **Shared focus**

‘A shared and stated focus is one factor which supports network growth: ‘Clusters are most effective when their purpose is stated and specific and ties in with school development plans.’ (PA18)

- **Impact from networking requires a heavy investment of time**

‘When teachers feel safe and supported in these groups which meet over a long period of time, communication among group members becomes more authentic and informative than daily teacher discourse in the staffroom.’ (PA21)

- **Collaboration and voluntarism**

‘Successful collaboration breeds further collaboration.’ (PA2, PA6, PA5)

‘Voluntarism in a network tends to increase motivation and commitment to its success.’ (PA5)

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