The leadership of adult learning in school networks

Summary report of the Networked Learning Communities programme enquiry 2004

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Executive summary

The key findings below are the main conclusions of the annual enquiry 2004 as they relate to the leadership of professional development within school networks. The full report was compiled by the research team of the Networked Learning Group(NLG), part of the National College for School Leadership. The enquiry itself involved the NLG's facilitators in gathering data from each of the existing networked learning communities (NLCs). In particular, networks were asked to identify the most networked aspect of professional development with which they were involved. Analysis of the data focused around three key questions about the impact which leadership of networks has had on CPD, on classroom practice and on school-to-school learning.

These findings are of increasing importance to school leaders because of the current changes to the ways in which CPD is being funded and managed. School leaders have increasing autonomy over CPD and associated budgets. There are also increased expectations that CPD will be delivered using collaborative models. The revised CPD strategy of the DfES makes specific reference to headteachers' responsibility to work collaboratively with other schools, local authorities, providers of CPD and other stakeholders in order to ensure that staff have access to an appropriate range of CPD and that schools become professional learning communities. The revised strategy also makes specific reference to the expectation that teachers will support the development of their colleagues. (http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/professionaldevelopment/cpdstrategy/)

Key findings

Research question
How does the effective leadership of NLCs improve the quality of adult learning and CPD?

- **Providing a clear focus for adult learning**
  Effective networks have tended to focus on two inter-related areas: improving their knowledge of how pupils learn and their knowledge of effective teaching practices. Leaders of networks who maintained these two focuses were more likely to support a longer-term impact on teachers' activity in the classroom.

- **Improving strategic planning of adult learning**
  Strategic planning of adult learning and CPD by leaders of networks was at an early and limited stage in most cases. Working in a network requires school leaders to align their individual school plans with that of the whole network. The more successful networks adopted one of two strategies: either gaining an early commitment to a broad focus which each school could then develop in relation to its own needs, or incrementally moving towards an agreed set of themes from which schools could select a number to pursue in depth. This allowed for the benefits of networking to be balanced against the varying developmental stages of individual schools. This was a highly problematic area for many networks at the time of the annual enquiry.

- **Offering sustained adult learning**
  Each NLC was formed around a 'compelling idea' and this often provided the strategic direction for the delivery of adult learning opportunities by network leaders. Most networks were still at an early stage, with adult learning activities 'starting small' and impacting on a limited number of participants. Many networks, though, were beginning to use two-year plans to ensure that professional development was sufficiently sustained to give teachers time to apply new learning in their classrooms and to reflect upon the changes.

- **Building capacity for adult learning**
  Much of the emphasis on capacity-building at the point of the review had been on schools developing *external* capacity, unsurprisingly, given the emphasis on schools to 'become networked'. This external capacity-building often took the form of a number of cross-network teams who took responsibility for an aspect of professional development. The degree of internal capacity-building varied widely between networks and schools. In particular, development of internal capacity depends on individual headteachers and other network leaders committing to the challenge of setting up new CPD structures which relate to the network as a whole rather than simply their own school.

- **Using external expertise in adult learning**
  There was evidence of widespread use of external expertise by leaders of networks. Use of external expertise helped to maximise the quality and diversity of CPD opportunities. Much of this early external input was supported by the NLG programme funding. For this external expertise to become sustainable it needs to be built into the long-term strategic plans of a network. There was also evidence that ongoing links between networks and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can deliver positive results, but only if significant time is invested in setting up these arrangements and clearly agreeing the aims and objectives.

Research question
How does the effective leadership of NLCs ensure that CPD impacts on the quality of classroom practice?

- **Engaging in network activity**
  School leaders were encouraged to take a fresh look at their understanding of and approaches to long, medium and short-term planning of CPD and its link with school development planning. The challenge for leaders is to ensure that there is alignment between school and network development plans.

- **Encouraging teachers to gain first-hand practical experience of a wider range of learning environments than those present within their school**
  By visiting other schools and working and planning collaboratively with their staff, the size of the community to which teachers felt they belonged expanded. Impact was also dependent upon ensuring that teachers were exposed to good practice, saw it as relevant to their needs and those of their pupils, and was based on sound professional relationships between staff in different schools.

- **Enhancing staff's use of external programmes and exposure to strategies for improving their pedagogy in the classroom e.g AfL, learning styles, thinking skills programmes**
  This involved sustained interaction with external programmes, engagement with underlying research and ideas, and time to assimilate them into their classroom practices.

Research question
How do effective leaders of NLCs improve the quality of school-to-school learning?

- **Providing the time and space for exchanges to occur between their schools**
  The transfer and exchange of practice was most often one-to-many schools or many-to-many schools. School-to-school learning achieved its greatest reach and impact through meetings and activities which took place during the school day.

- **Using a range of tools and activities**
  This included conferences, training and workshops, and modelling. Use of these tools and activities required dedicated, planned and creative use of time and resources by leaders.

- **Recognising the central role of enquiry in widening the participation of teachers and others, such as teaching assistants, in developing and embedding new initiatives**

- **Paying attention to the need to change cultures within schools, particularly around teachers' understanding and perception of pupils' capabilities**
  In some cases this was the basis for engaged sharing and collaborative networked learning between schools.

- **Quickly moving from ad hoc arrangements and into the realm of strategic planning**
  Leaders of schools and networks need to be the drivers of this planning.