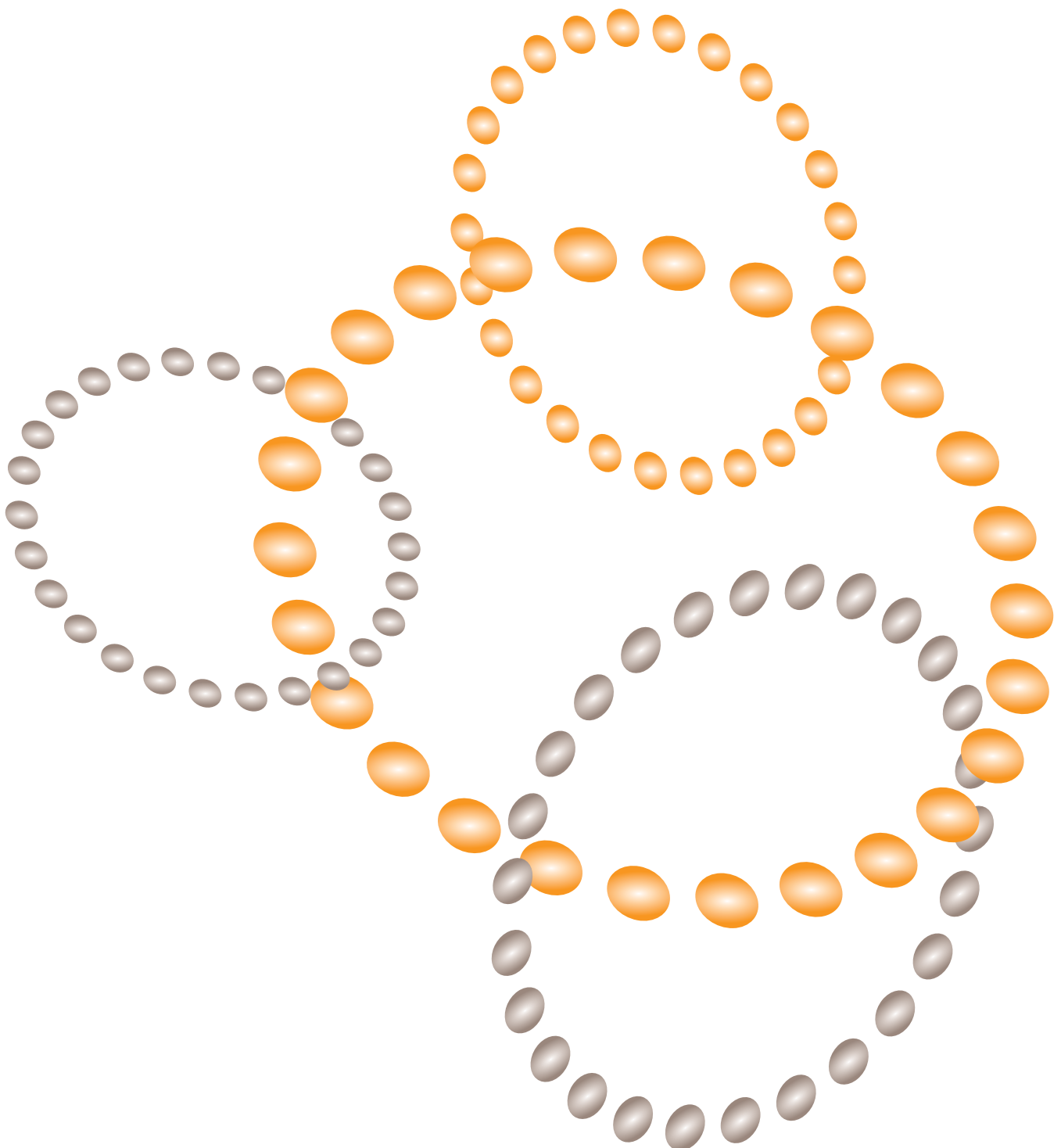
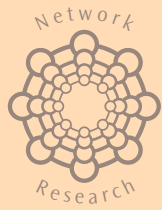


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# Leading collaborative enquiry in school networks





## Leading collaborative enquiry in school networks

Some key messages for network and partnership leaders, school leaders, local authority and HEI staff, and all others interested in supporting collaborative practitioner enquiry.

John Westwell

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## Introduction

### Practitioner enquiry and research

Practitioner enquiry and research is now recognised within schools as playing a crucial role in teachers' development. Many have engaged in action research, most often as part of a higher education qualification, and have found it to have a profound impact on their thinking and practice. The establishment in England of the National Teacher Research Panel (NTRP)<sup>1</sup> in 1999 further confirms the long-term relevance of practitioner enquiry for the education community.

### Collaborative enquiry in school networks

For many teachers, their experience of enquiry will have been rather an isolated one, perhaps only supported by a mentor or tutor from higher education. Consequently, more attention has been given recently to collaborative enquiry. For example, the National Foundation for Educational Research's (NFER) *Research Engaged School* programme looked at how schools can place research at the heart of their development activity.

Further to this the National College for School Leadership's (NCSL) Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme has been a stimulus for many school networks to engage in collaborative enquiry. This network research summary addresses how collaborative enquiry has been led and developed in the context of school networks. In particular, it examines the extra benefits and challenges of the school network dimension.

## How to use this summary

### Key aspects

The combination of existing knowledge about leadership of enquiry and the emerging lessons from NLCs suggests the following seven key aspects are important when leading collaborative enquiry in school networks:

#### Key aspects of leading enquiry in school networks:

- 1 agreeing the enquiry theme
- 2 identifying the enquirers
- 3 establishing collaborative enquiry groups
- 4 securing external support
- 5 facilitating knowledge transfer and testing
- 6 nurturing the enquiry culture
- 7 building leadership capacity for enquiry

### Using this summary

On each page you will find:

- a description and discussion of a key aspect
- an example of the kind of theory or research that relates to the aspect
- two or more examples of relevant practice that leaders of enquiry have reported and which illustrate the key aspects
- one or two references to follow up for further reading and to recognise the source of the theory or research quoted
- some challenging questions for leaders of enquiry in networks to consider – questions that need to be addressed in order to take a network forward in this area

<sup>1</sup>National Teacher Research Panel (see <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp>)

Sharp, C, Eames, A, Sanders, D & Tomlinson, K, 2006, *Leading a Research-engaged School*, Nottingham, NCSL

## How does the network dimension impact on leading enquiry?



Figure 1: The changing unit of enquiry

Advocates of practitioner enquiry and research have long hoped that it might become established as a sustainable part of our education culture. They have argued that it encourages deep professional learning, which can inform significant changes in understanding and practice. However, despite the undoubted impact that engagement in research has on so many, it has not yet become a normal part of professional life for all teachers. As long as the unit of enquiry remains the lone researcher, then this may continue.

Growing commitment to collaborative enquiry offers the opportunity for the unit of enquiry to change. A research-engaged school can establish structures and ways of working so that practitioner enquiry can make a difference not only to the individual participants, but also to the whole school community. However, it may be that a further stage of development – an enquiring school network – will offer the unit of enquiry which will really see practitioner enquiry embedded across our school system.

Evidence from the NLC programme and other areas suggests that:

- establishing enquiry in a school network can help individual schools become more research-engaged
- a school network provides a more practical and affordable unit of engagement with external partners
- schools in networks provide diverse contexts from the outset in which knowledge generated through enquiry can be tested
- networks have the capacity to sustain enquiry over the long term

This research summary provides an overview of the areas that leaders of collaborative enquiry in school networks will need to consider, including the benefits and the challenges of conducting an enquiry in a network context. It is important to note that the seven key aspects are complementary leadership actions rather than a linear process to be worked through. It is by working on each of the aspects that enquiry can become fully established in the life of a school network.

### Reference

Jackson, D & Temperley, J, 2006, *From Professional Learning Community to Networked Learning Community*, Nottingham, NCSL

## Key aspect 1: Agreeing the enquiry theme

Finding an enquiry theme that has high relevance across the network is important when first introducing enquiry. Over time, it is possible for school networks to enquire into several areas at the same time. There is, however, an ongoing tension for leaders of enquiry between agreeing a shared priority across schools and acknowledging the agendas of different schools and the enthusiasms of different staff.

### References from research

Hargreaves (2003) emphasises the need for disciplined prioritisation within networks: 'If teachers launch a new era of innovation, it is absolutely essential it be undertaken in a disciplined way. So we must think through which aspects are most valuable as themes. Every school has to pose the questions: what is the most important and urgent problem area and where do we think we could innovate successfully? And this needs to be collated to provide a picture of the overall needs of a group of schools. Choice of innovation will be more successful if it meets the agreed needs of a network working on it collectively.'

### Messages from practice

"It was important to ask insightful questions which challenge... As theories develop in response to the right questions, we have found that the most important characteristic of an enquiry is the questions we ask and the problems they identify."

"Earlier efforts to engage the whole network in highly focused collaborative research were not always successful because of differences between schools... However, the more recently established shared research themes have provided a common structure for the network's research activities, whilst at the same time being sufficiently flexible to be interpreted in ways which are relevant to individual schools, teachers and students."

### Pause for thought...?

What do you think should be the basis for identifying the priorities to be addressed through enquiry in your network?

As a leader of collaborative enquiry, how will you take account of both the different priorities emerging from schools in your network and the specific areas of interest of individual enquirers?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

### Reference

Hargreaves, D, 2003, *Working laterally: how innovation networks make an education epidemic*, London, DfES

## Key aspect 2: Identifying the enquirers

Finding people who are keen to enquire into practice and learn on behalf of others is another key leadership task. However, those leading enquiry have found that many staff are willing to engage when they know the research will be collaborative and has the potential to make a real difference to them and their pupils. They soon value the rich professional learning that enquiry offers. Once a first group of enquirers has been established within a network they will often act as strong advocates of the enquiry experience and so encourage further staff to participate.

### References from research

When studying teacher researchers, Campbell (2002) found: 'The experience of doing research had provided an oasis for the project teachers, giving them increased self-confidence to talk about their practice in informed ways. They had felt the luxury of sitting down and discussing their own professional development and felt they had been able to develop a language of professional discussion. Many agreed that regular reflection and evaluation of their practice had contributed to the raising of standards of teaching and learning in their schools and classrooms.'

### Messages from practice

"The only entry requirement for the group was that teachers were prepared to enquire critically into their own practice."

"The members of the groups included a wide range of professionals with varying levels of experience. They were not the people who would have particularly chosen research as a normal approach to professional development."

"To make it successful, it has to be something you want to do, it has to be something that's having a big impact for the children."

"Engagement in innovation through enquiry has transformed the perception of teachers of themselves as learners, leaders and ultimately knowledge creators."

### Pause for thought...?

What are the characteristics you would look for in someone wanting to participate in enquiry in your network?

As a leader of collaborative enquiry, how will you persuade your network members that the enquiry process is valuable for all staff and not just an enthusiastic minority?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

### Reference

Campbell, A, 2002, Research and the professional self. In McNamara, O (ed), *Becoming an evidence-based practitioner – A framework for teacher-researchers*, London, Routledge Falmer



## Key aspect 3: Establishing collaborative enquiry groups

Collaborative enquiry requires people to come together in groups. Groups provide the setting for professional dialogue, including clarifying the enquiry focus, planning actions, reviewing evidence and reflecting on outcomes. Leaders of enquiry need to set the conditions to make this possible which, particularly in the early stages, may include the support of a facilitator. There is also a choice to be made about whether to have cross-school or within-school groups – both have advantages and disadvantages. However, the main leadership challenge is to ensure that effective ways of working together are established.

### References from research

The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) review (2003) into Continuing Professional Development (CPD) found: 'evidence that sustained collaborative CPD was linked with a positive impact upon teachers' repertoire of teaching and learning strategies, their ability to match these to students' needs, their self-esteem, confidence and their commitment to continuing learning and development. There is also evidence that such CPD was linked with a positive impact upon student learning processes, motivation and outcomes.'

### Messages from practice

"A motivation for the teachers was being part of the research group. They appreciated the professional dialogue that took place and indeed wished that there was more time for this within their own teams."

"Teacher-researcher partnerships have enabled teachers to be reflective, engage in professional dialogue and to challenge each other to be critically analytical."

"It's been a real eye-opener, feeling part of that wider community which I never did before... It's been great being able to communicate and work with colleagues from very different types of school."

### Pause for thought...?

What do you think are some of the key types of work that collaborative enquiry groups need to do when they come together?

As a leader of collaborative enquiry, what supporting conditions do you need to put in place if the enquiry groups in your network are going to function well?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

### Reference

EPPI-Centre, 2003, *How does collaborative Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers of the 5 – 16 age range affect teaching and learning?* <http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk>

## Key aspect 4: Securing external support

Leaders of enquiry have found that it is very helpful to enlist the support of external partners, especially when they are first introducing enquiry in their network. Support can come from higher education, local authorities or independent consultants. The support can include introduction to enquiry and research methods, direct access to the public knowledge base, and critical friendship to enquiry groups. It is more manageable and cost-effective, both for schools and external partners, if leaders of enquiry can organise support on behalf of the whole network.

### References from research

McLaughlin and Black-Hawkins (2005) found that: 'those who were engaged in supporting research and enquiry from outside the school or network were reported to offer particular elements that give an insight into the leadership tasks for those working from the outside-in. They were able to:

- focus and take staff learning beyond classroom or school
- offer research training and support and respond to the changing needs of the practitioners
- offer alternative, challenging perspectives
- form supportive and invigorating relationships.'

### Messages from practice

"Through the seminars and one-to-one support the research mentors were able to offer the input on both research methods and the research theme that the teachers required."

"The HEI support took on a greater role, encouraging researchers to think more widely and analytically about other research, both within the group and beyond."

"The research training provided by the HEI has been crucial to the success of the research activities: offering useful technical skills and knowledge to teachers as well as developing their confidence. It has also encouraged a shared language and understanding across the group of researchers, thus supporting their learning as a network."

### Pause for thought...?

What do you think may be the benefits to external partners in supporting enquiry within school networks?

As a leader of collaborative enquiry, which external partners will you approach to support your network and what role will you ask them to perform?



Please use this space to record your thoughts

### Reference

McLaughlin, C & Black-Hawkins, K, 2005, *Practitioner Research and Enquiry in Networked Learning Communities*, Cambridge, University of Cambridge Faculty of Education



## Key aspect 5: Facilitating knowledge transfer and testing

As well as benefiting the participants, enquiry in networks is always done on behalf of others. Leaders of collaborative enquiry need to ensure that there are effective ways in which the enquiry groups can communicate their work with the rest of the network. This involves a combination of ongoing updates during the enquiry process and final reports or learning products that are widely distributed. One of the strengths of enquiry in networks is that emerging knowledge or practice can be quickly tested in a diverse range of contexts, thus giving those outside any particular enquiry group an important role to play. Networks working in this way have the potential to create knowledge that is of value to the wider system.

### References from research

Fielding and colleagues (2005) questioned the usefulness of the usual notions of 'knowledge transfer' and 'practice transfer' and instead introduced the idea of 'joint practice development'. This concept emphasises the important role of both those who have conducted the enquiry and those wanting to learn from the results of the enquiry. The enquirers have a role in encouraging their colleagues to use enquiry processes to test out the ideas and practice being generated.

### Messages from practice

"Our reflection now is that it is important that various people in schools receive ongoing oral reports during the course of teachers' research work... many of our teachers did not have the opportunity to do this regularly within school."

"A community of enquiry does not depend on extensive report writing to be successful. Each researcher reported on their findings by writing a summary, which was generally no longer than one side of A4 and followed an agreed format."

"The methodology has been explored by teacher researchers in schools in the UK and abroad. This has provided an opportunity for it to be tested in multiple settings."

### Pause for thought...?

What forms of communication do you think members of a network would want to receive regarding any enquiry work taking place in their network?

As a leader of collaborative enquiry, how can you ensure that the knowledge generated by enquiry is tested thoroughly within your network?

*Please use this space to record your thoughts*

### Reference

Fielding, M, Bragg, S, Craig, J, Cunningham, I, Eraut, M, Gillinson, S, Horne, M, Robinson, C & Thorp, J, 2005, *Factors Influencing the Transfer of Good Practice*, London, DfES

## Key aspect 6: Nurturing the enquiry culture

Practitioner enquiry is always a challenging and demanding process. This means that leaders of collaborative enquiry need to protect the enquiry process so that it can result in useful outcomes for the whole network. This includes seeking to ensure that: enquirers are encouraged to continue especially when faced with obstacles; proper acknowledgement is given to the enquirers for the work they are doing on behalf of the network; the whole community understands that enquiry takes time and can not always produce quick results; school leaders provide the necessary supporting resources, especially time; and that due account is taken of school leaders' requirements that enquiry work leads to positive change.

### References from research

Jackson and Street (2005) highlight the importance for leaders of the concept of reciprocal accountability: 'The system is asking more from schools and from school leaders in terms of raising the bar and closing the gap of achievement. School leaders in their turn are increasing their expectations of their staff. It is the leaders who have the responsibility to create the enabling conditions for collaborative enquiry and sustained learning to take place in our schools.'

### Messages from practice

"We learnt that internal support within a school was vital. This was mainly in the form of taking an interest and offering encouragement. If teachers knew their research work was valued by colleagues, their line manager and by senior leadership, it made a big difference to their work."

"As leaders, we were aware of the tensions and difficulties in the process. At times there was a cultural tension in that the national climate was one of performance and accountability, whereas learning was about making mistakes, experimenting and critiquing."

### Pause for thought...?

What do you think are the aspects of enquiry work that staff find most challenging?

As a leader of collaborative enquiry, what will you do to ensure that your enquirers and enquiry groups feel supported and sustained in their work?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

### Reference

Jackson, D & Street, H, 2005, What does 'collaborative enquiry' look like? In Street, H & Temperley, J (eds), *Improving Schools Through Collaborative Enquiry*, London, Continuum

## Key aspect 7: Building leadership capacity for enquiry

In order to ensure that collaborative enquiry becomes embedded in network practice it is important to develop leadership capacity in this area. Networks have found that once staff have experienced enquiry they can take on leadership and facilitation roles within later enquiries. Some networks have sought to identify research co-ordinators within each school who have, in turn, built capacity for enquiry within the school and across the network.

### References from research

Harris and Lambert (2003) emphasise the importance for schools to build leadership capacity: 'If schools are to be real learning communities this cannot be achieved by operating with outdated models of change and improvement dependent upon individual leadership. Developing and sustaining school improvement will require schools to invest in and nurture the leadership capabilities of all those within their school community.'

### Messages from practice

"Annual critical-friendship training has taken place to allow individuals to learn how to act as critical friends, to learn how to lead enquiry and support reflective practice."

"Sustainability of the enquiry work will now be a challenge, but a measure of its success is that all involved want to maintain this work."

"Enquiry work is building capacity within and across schools and developing a critical mass of leaders who advocate school-based enquiry as an effective strategy for continuing professional development."

### Pause for thought...?

Who in your network of schools do you think can already fulfil leadership and facilitation roles for enquiry?

As a leader of collaborative enquiry, what actions will you take to ensure that further individuals and groups can take on the leadership of enquiry in the future?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

### Reference

Harris, A & Lambert, L, 2003, *Building leadership capacity for school improvement*, Maidenhead, Open University Press

## Further reading

Earl, L & Katz, S, 2006, *How networked learning communities work*, Nottingham, National College for School Leadership

McLaughlin, C & Black-Hawkins, K, 2005, *Practitioner Research and Enquiry in Networked Learning Communities*, Cambridge, University of Cambridge Faculty of Education

NCSL, 2006, *Getting started with Networked Collaborative Enquiry*, Nottingham, National College for School Leadership

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