

## System Thinkers in Action? The Leadership of Networks of Schools

Michelle Anderson

This paper is number three of four papers prepared for a symposium for the  
American Educational Research Association (AERA) Conference 2004,  
Montreal, April 11<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup>.

This paper is in **draft** form.  
Please do not quote without prior permission of the author.

Michelle Anderson  
National College for School  
Leadership  
Networked Learning  
Derwent House  
University Way  
Cranfield  
Bedfordshire  
MK43 OAZ

[Interface2@hotmail.com](mailto:Interface2@hotmail.com)

## **System Thinkers in Action? The Leadership of Networks of Schools**

Michelle Anderson

### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the leadership and facilitation of England's Networked Learning Communities (NLCs). Empirically, it draws together case studies of individual networks, 33 interviews with network leaders, program-wide annual review data on leadership learning and data from the recently completed inquiry into the impact of networks on 109 individuals. It discusses leadership in a Networked Learning Community as a dynamic balancing of forces, dealing with contradictions and exploiting opportunities. It explores how leadership and improvement challenges are made more complex by the reciprocity and interplay between the socio-cultural and political needs of the external system and the internal needs and purposes of one specific network. In conclusion, it argues that system-thinking leaders are learning the necessity of paying attention to two potentially contradictory sets of ideas to achieve purposeful change across a range of environments: 'structures, processes and results' *and* 'person, place and purpose'.

---

### **Introduction**

Regardless of our ideology, practice, research or policy stance, networks are contributing to the culture of our society and how we view and practice learning. This has implications for the leadership of networks. Questions arise, such as how are networks to be led? How are decisions to be made? How is change for the 'better' conceived? Who benefits from the decisions made? And how will we know? These are not new questions in the leadership repertoire. However, they are new in the context of this paper – England's Networked Learning Communities (NLC) involving the development of school-to-school networks, reaching approximately 6% of all schools, and launched in September 2002 by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). They are new in light of other significant social changes, such as a widening remit of stakeholders in the learning and wellbeing of children; changes in staffing profiles; increased complexity of schools and school relations; adding and expansion of roles within schools (DfES, 2003; DfES, 2004a; National Remodelling Team, 2004). These changes place the notions of fracture and coherence in a dynamic tension, creating conditions of possibility and constraint.

To date, our empirical evidence from the program identifies a particular form of network leadership – co-leadership – as pivotal to the perceived success (especially early success) of the network. As such, the focus, particularly in this paper, on network leadership, of which co-leadership is a significant element, is both a pragmatic and analytical decision. It's pragmatic in that this is one of a four-paper symposium addressing the same issue of system leadership in association with the NLC's program from different vantage points (policy; district and school). It's an analytical decision in that co-leadership is viewed as both a role and a principle of the program. My premise is that developing our understanding of co-leader experiences in Networked Learning Community leadership is one route to deepening our understanding of other leadership forms and practice in networks.

### System thinkers in action

Network leadership creates different relational boundaries for the location of strategic and capacity building measures towards sustainability. From our program network, members convey this as shifts:

From	To
Working alone	Inter-dependence
Wariness	Trust and engagement
Busy and unfocused	Purposeful and disciplined action
Independent multiple agendas	A concept of being of <i>'like minds'</i> .

With these felt and espoused shifts are new challenges. Conditions inherited, inhabited and initiated by leaders have the potential to fracture and/or bolster democratic forms and practices of leadership. As NLC leaders are noting: "...the system is powerful – it reverts to type; how do we ensure that we stay dynamic and open to new ways of working?" (Bond et al, 2005, p.5). Put another way: just because we think new ways of working and learning should happen does not mean it will, or in some cases, that it can happen without significant changes to the rest of the system. System thinking is a potentially helpful frame because it allows us to examine different forces as they play out in the leadership of school-to-school networks.

Michael Fullan (2004) coined the phrase 'system thinkers in action'. These system thinkers in action take the notion 'think global and act local' as a simultaneous dynamic relationship, along with views of 'short- and long-term' and other system forces, such as, the formalizing of networks; the rise in emphasis on leadership and expectations and processes associated with accountability and improvement. For example, network leaders may set up processes for school-to-school teacher inquiry groups with a view to improve classroom practice. Yet, in the absence of, for example, changes to individual school approaches to teacher collaboration, network leaders are finding holistic change very difficult to achieve. However, this is not simply a matter of scale – it is about making a sustainable improvement to the system. Here, moral purpose is seen as an individual disposition *and* a public system commitment for inclusive change. Others have framed this as an ethical alertness (Flood, 1999). So part of what system thinkers create are conditions for constructive friction at the various interfaces of the system. This means in some cases the introduction of, for example, new roles (e.g. 'co-leaders') and approaches to staffing within networks (e.g. joint appointments). As our programme is finding it raises questions about the 'content' and level of critical awareness in 'how' we engage each other (e.g. inquiry; dialogue vs debate) (e.g. Carter and Franey, 2004; Woods and Jones, 2005). Hence the argument that system-thinking leaders are learning the necessity of paying attention to 'structures, processes and results' *and* 'person, place and purpose'. This relationship emphasizes mutual responsibility and solution generation. This can be viewed as a qualitative shift in practice with respect to control, and for some this will mean a quantum leap in approaches to knowledge production.

### Shifts in network leadership inquiry emphasis

Last year in our AERA paper about network leadership we were one year into the program and much of our inquiry emphasis was exploratory (i.e. ‘what is going on here?’). Now, one year on, the national workforce remodelling is trying to take effect, more networks are being introduced within the system (such as Primary Strategy Learning Networks, DfES, 2004b); a new inspection relationship with schools and authorities is being implemented and the ‘Every Child Matters’ (DfES, 2003, 2004) agenda is ramping up – and these are just examples from England. The point is that NLCs do not inhabit the same spaces they did even twelve months ago. Most networks have undergone a change in co-leadership – have tried, refined and in some cases dispensed with foci in response to internal and external structures and processes set up to facilitate ‘networked learning’. Through this, the forces at play within the system are becoming more evident. So, while this year our focus has still been exploratory, like the focus of the network leaders themselves, it is with a more critical stance (i.e. how is it going on?). Hence the question-mark in the title of this paper: ‘System Thinkers in Action?’

Attempts to realize this principle of ‘system thinkers in action’ in the leadership of networks of schools presents an interesting conundrum. On the one hand there is an emerging view of leadership as less ‘dichotomous’ and more multi-directional and context-sensitive in its portrayal (e.g. Bottery, 2004). With this view comes a transformative agenda that has been building over the last few years. Specifically, this agenda draws attention to and calls for a shift toward leadership as a concern to which many contribute rather than one that is located in and enacted by a single individual (e.g. DfES, 2003, 2004a; Harris, 2004; Hopkins and Levin, 2001; Jackson 2004; Sheilds, 2004; West-Burnham, 2003; Wohlstetter *et al*, 2003). Others note, however, that systemic awareness is constrained by a heritage of leadership literature that is ‘tacitly’ present. It exists as broad brush-strokes across action, leaving it abstracted from the broader contextual and historical forces at play (e.g. Day *et al*, 2000; Leithwood and Levin, 2004; Lupton, 2004).

This paper seeks to deepen our understanding of the experiences of network leaders in NLCs. I am going to approach this in three ways. I will begin with an overview of this very specific form of leadership in NLCs – co-leadership. Next, I will locate this form of leadership within the complexity of forces in one actual NLC: Knowsley in England. To do this I draw on various accumulated empirical sources of data, such as, interviews with network leaders from Knowsley; Knowsley’s NLG Facilitator inquiry and Annual reviews and secondary sources, such as, OfSTED Local Education Authority reports and media articles. Finally, I broaden the discussion about leadership of networks to include learning from other network leaders in NLCs from across the country and findings from the analysis of program-wide Annual Review data of leadership learning and development and facilitator Spring Inquiry findings, into adult learning. For a discussion of the data source methods used to inform this paper see Appendix one. Throughout the paper, I attempt to draw attention to key areas of constraint and possibility, critiquing them in relation to the impact they are having on the strategies, capacity building and sustainability of this form of leadership and the leadership of these types of networks. I start by looking at the nature of co-leadership.

## Co-leadership of Networks

### Why 'co'-leadership?

Co-leaders are people who span different relational boundaries within the education system. This capacity to flow across and within boundaries (e.g. within schools; between schools; between theory, practice and policy) is perceived by network leaders as key to the development of this role within NLCs and to their system thinking fitness. I do not want to get into a debate about the language of leadership specifically, or its 'definitions', of which there are many (NCSL, 2003). However, I do think it is important to consider for a moment the question, 'what's in a name?' This is not as a diversion from this paper's focus; rather, I argue that in the context of educational leadership of networks language does matter as it has implications for how network leaders come to know themselves as particular types of leaders.

The idea of co-leadership was built, from the outset, into the design of the NLC programme so a degree of shared leadership could exist in all networks. More than this though, it symbolizes the interaction between individuals from different schools, an essential network activity that had been a common difficulty for networks of schools. Introducing the 'co' into 'leadership' served a dual purpose: it was a role and a principle. It created the potential for new relations and approaches to leadership that went beyond traditional notions of 'the leader' of 'the school'. The logic behind it is that by *working* your understanding of a new name this may act as a potential force for change: a new way to think about and practice leadership. This notion is replicated by co-leaders in diverse ways in their own leadership of networks. By midway through the second year of the NLC program, for example, from a sample of 40 inquiries, I noted 25 different names for various network-specific groups and roles (e.g. 'knowledge managers'; 'lead learners'; 'steering group'). The decisions made around naming these roles and groups, as I will return to later in the NLC example from Knowsley, reflected varying takes on what system thinking awareness meant for network leaders. Often, these appear to be value-based and ethical decisions made to maintain a sense of internal equity and coherence.

The requirement of co-leadership within the NLC programme was a practical response to some of the conditions and objectives generated by networked structures. The 'co' in co-leadership serves both to reduce the burden on individual leaders and to build a degree of resilience into the network by preventing excessive reliance on any one person. The actual boundary of 'co-leadership' has become increasingly fluid. Initially, co-leadership typically equated to two people but now it ranges from approximately two to twelve people. The specifics of how many co-leaders and who performed which role are left to the network to decide.

### Who are Co-leaders?

While the NLG did not specify that a co-leader should be a headteacher most of the written network submissions identified this to be the case. However, not all co-leaders of NLCs are headteachers of schools and there are shifts taking place in the number and range of co-leader roles (e.g. Assistant Headteachers, Deputy Headteachers; classroom teachers; SENCOs, LEA; and HEI). As the figures below demonstrate, most co-leaders are derived from within schools. However, there has been an increase in non-school-based and non-headteacher co-leaders from 2003–2004, but for most NLCs, headteachers are the co-leaders. Percentage figures for male and female co-leaders are roughly in line with current national percentages of full-time qualified teachers in England (44.8% male, 55.2% female) – although exact comparisons cannot be made due to a small percentage of co-leaders coming from other locations (e.g. Higher Education).

Co-leader Location	2003 Number	2003%	2004 Number	2004%
Home-based	30	9	5	2
HEI-based	14	4	11	4
LEA-based	22	7	17	6
School-based	253	80	270	88
Co-leaders in Schools	2003 Number	2003%	2004 Number	2004%
Headteacher	171	68%	176	65%
Other	82	32%	94	35%
Gender	2003 Number	2003%	2004 Number	2004%
Female	181	56%	175	56%
Male	133	42%	130	42%
Unknown	5	2%	7	2%

Most co-leaders were volunteered by others, but voluntarily accepted the challenge of co-leading. This appears to be more by default than design. For example, headteacher co-leaders recalled being volunteered by other headteacher peers because, for instance, their school had just successfully completed a nationally implemented external inspection through OfSTED (the Office for Standards in Education). This meant, therefore, they were perceived to have greater capacity to take this type of role on. Non-headteacher co-leaders recalled being volunteered or invited by headteachers. Others spoke of being part of the bid-writing to become an NLC, which then evolved into their becoming a co-leader.

### How do co-leaders frame what they do?

The practice of co-leading involves a philosophy of knowledge-in-action. From three case studies conducted in the first year of the program, inquiry and various writing about co-leadership and facilitation in networked learning communities, there can be seen four key philosophical dimensions used by co-leaders<sup>(1)</sup>. These dimensions are not discrete, and each one expresses a particular aspect of leadership:

- ✓ **Co-ordinating and planning:** the importance of understanding different roles within any network; strong management and operational skills founded on a belief that networks need management but cannot be managed
- ✓ **Developing people and processes:** the need to be a driving force, encouraging exploration and transformation
- ✓ **Meeting emotional and social needs:** the discernment of others' needs, the ability to make people feel valued; a 'coaching' mentality
- ✓ **Creating a culture of evidence-led improvement:** the creativity and critical judgement to test theories and change practice.

<sup>1</sup> Co-leader inquiry with over 200 network leaders at a NLC event November 2003 (Creasy and Jackson); three case studies about network leadership and facilitation in 2003 (Kubiak and Anderson); synthesis of Co-leader learning into a publication 'Leading a new network: challenges and strategies' (Spender) from network events and 2003 program-wide inquiries in the Networked Learning Group (2003).

Certain attributes seem to be more important than others for co-leaders when undertaking tasks, such as getting other headteachers to 'buy-in' and 'maintain a commitment' to the concept and practices of a NLC. These include enthusiasm, energy, curiosity, communications skills, humour and the capacity to deal with complexity, ambiguity and contradictions.

As key knowledge-brokers between external program developers and colleagues within schools, co-leaders have to deal with the outcomes and implications of leadership expectations within and between schools and the network. So while co-leaders might be relatively comfortable within their role, their leadership development and therefore how they set about contributing to an NLC remain precarious and vulnerable to internal and external network conditions. For example, changes in co-leadership, levels of co-leader engagement and in the varying levels of engagement from other adults and children in schools. Close examination of one particular NLC helps to unravel a picture of the ways different forces impact on co-leaders' capacity to be system thinkers in action.

### **Network forces operating in the leadership of one NLC<sup>2</sup>**

System thinking would propose that the development of network leadership cannot be seen in isolation from other system relations (e.g. with the local education authority). With this in mind, the next section of this paper presents an accumulating portrait, from primary and secondary data sources, of one NLC's development towards sustainability.


I selected this network because of its relevance to other papers in this symposium, and because it illustrates a variety of forces, such as a history of collaboration, network leader beliefs about the purpose of initiatives and timing of opportunities. These and other forces present a challenge not just to its leadership but to the system as a whole. I follow this example with a broader discussion from other findings about NLC leadership particularly the dimensions of strategy, capacity building and sustainability. Here I draw in program-wide data from the Annual Review and network inquiries and other project inquiries as a way to compare and contrast the approaches being taken to NLC leadership, and as a reminder of the constraints and possibilities that network contexts provide.

#### **Local conditions in Knowsley**

Knowsley is a small metropolitan area of Merseyside in the northwest of England. It lies adjacent to the city of Liverpool. Virtually all of the pupil population is of white UK origin but, although small in number, there is a diverse range of minority and ethnic groups and language background (OfSTED, 2003).

---

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Chris Kubiak and Joan Burtram for interview data from the 'Growth Structure and Leadership' project. Thanks also to David How, NLG Facilitator for inquiry data from the 2004 NLG Inquiries into adult learning and CPD strategies within NLCs.

KNOWSLEY Description	Value	Map of Local Education Authority
Population circa:	<b>150,000</b>	 <p>Merseyside</p> <p>Knowsley</p> <p>Knowsley is a northwest England authority within the large urban area of Merseyside. The closest major city is Liverpool.</p>
Total School population (OfSTED 2003 report)	<b>28,022 (19% of the total borough population)</b>	
Primary Schools:	<b>58</b>	
Secondary Schools:	<b>11</b>	
Special Schools:	<b>8</b>	
Nursery Schools:	<b>N/A</b>	
Total Schools:	<b>77</b>	

Adapted from: <http://www.schoolgovernors-oss.org.uk/leastats.php?lea=Knowsley>

Urban regeneration efforts have seen improvements in the access to housing and the attraction of new business to the area. However, reports from OfSTED from the last five years highlight the area's significant deprivation, as reflected in the comments from The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's Statistics. They place the Knowsley area as the sixth most deprived authority nationally. Within the authority, over 79 per cent of residents live in the most deprived 10 per cent of wards in England. According to OfSTED, "Four out of ten children live in homes where there is no earned income. A third of children live in one-parent households: this is high compared to national averages" (OfSTED report, 2003, p. 10).

Within this context, in 2001 over 50 per cent of the secondary schools in Knowsley were considered by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to be in challenging circumstances (OfSTED, 2003). OfSTED cites this degree of disadvantage as a reason for the authority being the target of a number of government assistant sources of funding. Further funding rises from government are noted for schools in the area over the next few years (DfES, 2004).

With these local conditions what sorts of system thinking in action are we seeing in Knowsley NLC? What is constraining and enhancing network leadership forms and practice possibilities?

## **The Instigation of a Knowsley NLC**

### An emphasis on leadership, networks and improvement

Major changes to the leadership of the local education authority (LEA) ensued from the 1999 OfSTED authority report, with a new Director for Education and Life-long Learning<sup>3</sup> commencing in 2000, along with other new staff. Standards, aspirations and self-esteem were noted as the key foci for the LEA. Teaching and learning, and problems of disadvantage became the key sites for the development and deployment of approaches and practices (OfSTED, 2003). One of the new structures and processes introduced by the Director was a visioning conference that included young people from schools in the authority. This became an annual site for the sharing of ideas, challenge and clarification of priorities. It provided another opportunity to legitimize and build relationships between the school communities and LEA.

Between 1999 and 2003 conditions in the borough were changing. Education beyond 16 had risen from 51% (with the national average being 67%) to 62% while free-school-meal-entitlements (FSME) had dropped from 54.5% (three times the national average) to 42.2% (two and half times the national average). Pupil-teacher ratios in classes had improved (OfSTED, 2003). While significant gaps still existed results seemed to indicate these were narrowing not widening.

Given the degree of issues within the community, a philosophy of collaboration was already viewed as a necessary approach to addressing identified foci. This was evident through schools already having an established history of working together in other forms of networks and collaborative arrangements. Notably, these networks included the Excellence in Cities (EiC) initiative commenced in 1999; a small Education Action Zone (EAZ), three City Learning Centres and a targeted teaching and learning collegiate model for 14–19 year olds.

### Formalizing networks as a matter beyond just scale

The decision to become a NLC was seen as a value-led decision to do more collaborative activity, but with more structure and focus and further into the schools. This decision was reinforced by the perceived credibility of the people who were promoting these notions of a particular type of collaboration focused on the learning of children (i.e. 'networked learning'). The £50,000 that came with being a NLC, while necessary, was not a key motivating force for developing a NLC bid. Nor, as experiences in Knowsley bear out, is it enough on its own to create and sustain the critical mass needed for teachers to practice new networked ways of teaching and learning. Rather, what the NLC philosophy in combination with funding does for Knowsley NLC is create the flexibility to initiate new ways of learning between schools that, according to the network leaders, keeps the explicit focus of activity directly linked to improving teaching and learning. This flexibility to innovate and experiment seems to create momentum to initiate activity deeper within the schools, with relatively low risk implications, while simultaneously supporting the premise of the program to broaden relationships.

---

<sup>3</sup> This Director has since become the new CEO of the National College for School Leadership. Steve Munby took up this role in March 2005.

### Conditions shaping the instigation of the Knowsley NLC

Knowsley officially became a NLC in 2002, part of the first of what would become three cohort intakes into the NLC programme. To this day they are one of only 15 all secondary-school NLCs. The size of the network (11 schools) is consistent with the average national size of an NLC (12 schools). The introduction of the NLC program coincided with other conditions in the authority. These were the receipt from the DfES of a 'Leadership Incentive Grant' (LiG), and, more globally in educational leadership debates, the promotion of closer partnerships in the form of networks. This global picture aligned with the needs expressed by Headteachers and reflected by the 1999 OfSTED report.

The focus on teaching and learning was a continuous and vigorous multi-pronged strategy across the authority. This was spurred on by the schools' own strong commitment to teaching and learning, and by OfSTED reports that noted pupil attainment and achievement results that were well below the national average. An early challenge for the NLC Co-leaders was trying to create coherence out of the various strands of existing activity. The belief and logic was that without such efforts NLC and other activity would have a reduced impact across Knowsley, because of such things as remaining a cul-de-sac even if what was happening in a particular site was powerful. These efforts, along with the Co-leaders' capacity to realize a more inclusive participation in being an NLC, were initially constrained by the NLC configuration growing out of an existing cluster of six secondary schools. Also, whilst all activity was directed to teaching and learning, the various sources of funding held different expectations of approach and evaluation.

### **Co-leadership and the Distribution of Early Tasks**

#### The configuration of co-leadership

The co-leadership of the Knowsley NLC was shared initially between a secondary school Headteacher and a consultant from the Centre for Education and Leadership at the University of Manchester. The consultant led and co-ordinated an action research framework and a leadership and school improvement strategy programme (e.g. help teachers to measure at the end of a year what progress they had been making in maths). The Headteacher Co-leader, because of their school network position, acted as a broker between the NLG and the other Headteachers. In the early days, attendance at NLG events and visits from program developers to the network provided additional support to the Co-leader in the form of critical friendship and the brokering of new ideas from other networks.

#### The configuration of the Knowsley NLC – moral and strategic considerations

The decision to extend, very early in the first year, the membership of the NLC from six to all eleven secondary schools seemed to show awareness by the co-leaders of the short and long-term implications of 'not' being more inclusive. This appears to involve tactical, strategic and ethical considerations. It was a tactical decision because it dealt with an immediate perceived personal need as a co-leader to try to develop some coherence and reduce the potential for division between the schools. [Although later this issue would be felt again by the Co-leaders as they sought to balance 'tagged' funding requirements with the need for some collaborative activity to extend beyond just the secondary schools to also include the primary schools]. It seemed to be a strategic decision because it laid the foundation for the facilitation of new lateral structures and processes at teacher level – before becoming a NLC the formal structure between schools had rested with the headteacher group – and it supported the positioning of NLC within another significant government funded programme source – the Leadership Incentive Grant (LiG). It seemed also to demonstrate an ethical alertness to conditions internal to the network that might cause it to fracture. These possibilities brought new challenges.

### Conditions shaping the formalizing of networks within Knowsley

As a result of these additional program inputs complications arose. What seemed simple – to position the NLC within the teaching and learning strand of LiG – involved a lot of negotiation and thinking with the other Headteachers. In the process this also brought to the surface the potential duality of the impacts of decisions made. This re-positioning of the NLC was seen by the Co-leaders to create possibilities (e.g. the drawing together of people around a common need), while simultaneously raising potential constraints, such as notions of ‘with’ and ‘within’ the LiG. These have knock-on effects in relation to issues of identity and accountability: ‘would teachers know they were part of an NLC?’, ‘Is this important?’, ‘For whom?’, ‘Why?’

The early co-leader leadership activity saw the focus of the NLC align itself closely within the LiG. This expanded the co-leadership of the NLC to include the leader of the LiG teaching and learning strand – another Headteacher. This also served to reduce the burden of brokerage with peers on the one Headteacher. This decision, although unknown at the time, was also to build some resilience into the co-leadership – later in the first year, the co-leadership capacity was reduced, firstly through the sudden departure of the HEI Co-leader who notified the other headteachers that they would be leaving, and then the following year the original Headteacher Co-leader took a less active role due to the school commitments of an OfSTED inspection.

### **Building Network Capacity in Knowsley**

The location and practice of NLC activity within the LiG strand came about through a series of overlapping and evolving events within the networks, such as, timing; internal and external pressure to improve performance and one of the Co-leaders being the strand leader of teaching and learning for LiG.

### Emphasis on leadership expectations and processes – and the conditions that shape them

The identification, across the borough, of teaching and learning as the focus about one year prior to the presence of NLC resulted in a series of internal and external forms of facilitation being initiated. Some targeted all staff (e.g. LEA sponsored whole staff two-day training across the borough utilising a high-profile thinker in the area of accelerated learning) which then led into the development of specific groups with responsibility to ‘hold the agenda’ within each school for teaching and learning development, implementation and evaluation (e.g. school-based ‘lead learners’). Who, how many and how these ‘lead learners’ were to be identified was up to the headteacher of each school to decide. So, for example one school sent a group of eight people from across different departments who were already working on an in-school but similar type of initiative. They already had the time and space to work together (e.g. co-planning; co-teaching; co-evaluating; popping in and out of each others’ classes) with half of their timetabled time spent with Year 7 which allowed for greater experimentation that they believed would produce greater impact on their practice. Wrapped around the instigation of this lateral authority-wide group was a structured development programme, run after school by a consultant (one of two hired by the LEA), totalling six days. While the notion of collaboration in teaching and learning was a strongly held belief across the authority. the use of name ‘lead learner’ was not applied by all schools. For example, one Headteacher’s approach was not to single out a ‘lead learner’ because of a belief that this put an extra burden of expectation that may constrain an individual’s capacity to feel free to make mistakes.

Simultaneous to this practice within the authority were the development of other roles and structures (e.g. Borough-wide pool of Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs); Headteachers' group; A Headteachers' and LEA leadership group; and a pooled financial stream from the LiG grant with matched funding from the LEA to support what they called an Innovation and Collaboration Partnership, ICP). Absent, the network leaders comment, were structures and processes that connected some of these roles to the improvement of borough-wide teaching and learning. This lateral gap was also matched by variable in-school structures and processes.

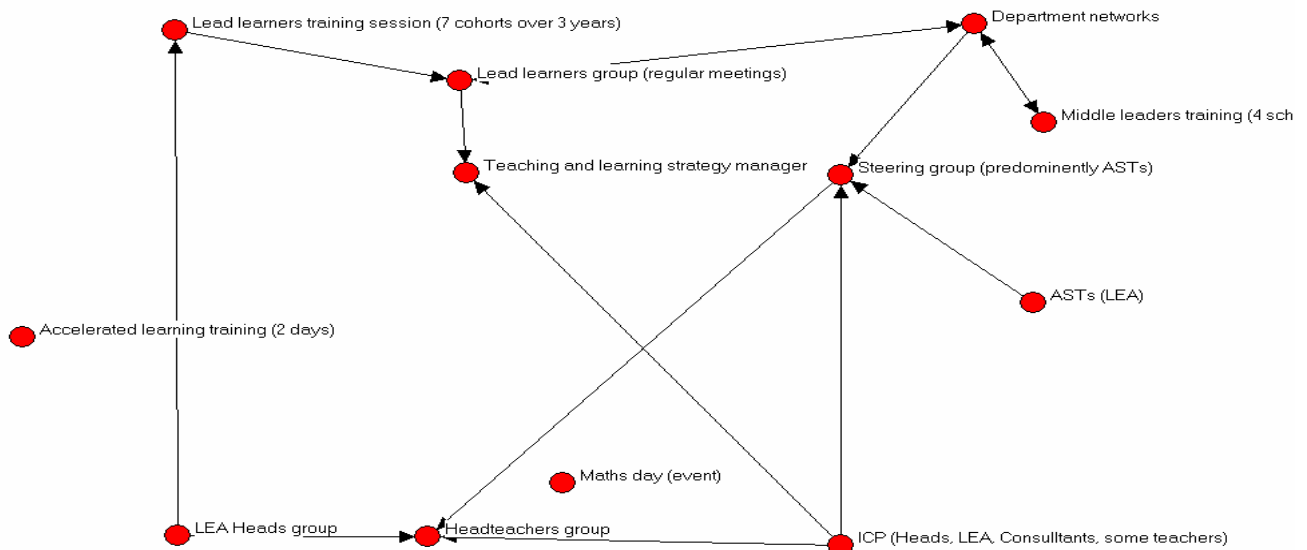
All this was going on at about the same time that NLC came on board, but it was not a NLC instigated initiative. Instead NLC philosophy and funding was used as a catalyst to infiltrate and spread the learning from the lead learner group to other areas of the school. In the case of the previous example this meant the lead learners working with four different Heads of Department as part of the NLC and these Heads doing a 'Middle Leaders – leading learning' course to develop their capacity alongside the lead learners, 'with' them rather than a notion of dependency. Maths was identified as a common problem across the borough and together these people within the schools set about to develop this area further.

A tipping point as a Knowsley, NLC was a maths event at the end of the first year. Schools volunteered what they perceived as being good practices in maths. All maths teachers from the 11 schools came together, set up by the network leaders. Four of the lead learners ran the day and teachers listened and discussed what it was about these practices that made them work. The feedback was that the day 'felt real' because it was with and from people who were working in similar conditions. A demand to repeat the day, which they did, came about because of the powerful learning the teachers reported to their colleagues (who had not attended). The nature of the collaboration during the day was enquiry with a shared experience of the local conditions of the schools and community. The schools could have shared written pieces about their experiences but the network leaders felt this would be more akin to transfer but not necessarily lead to adoption or implementation.

The funding for the lead learner group came to an end and the momentum gained from this approach to school-to-school learning was at risk of being lost if it was not more closely aligned into the NLC and LiG. So, through LiG the Middle Leader Strategy Managers were created – a senior person identified by the Headteacher within each school, who may be an AST, Department Heads and/or a lead learner, but not the Headteacher. A strategic steering group for teaching and learning across the authority was established. The Co-leader / LiG teaching and learning strand leader / Headteacher chairs the group but with a view that others will take this role on. People who are direct links from the classroom and from different perspectives (e.g. external consultant; NLC) into the activities across the authority participate and a format for monitoring progress every time the group meets was developed.

### Formalizing the network structures and relationships

Eighteen months in and the network structures and relationships, as described by the co-leaders, looked something like this:



(Kubiak, 2004)

Within this diagram NLC activity spanned a number of structural and process areas of Knowsley (e.g. headteacher group; department head training). The Middle Strategy Teaching and Learning Managers, four from across the secondary schools, became the engine room for NLC ideas to be trialled and if deemed successful another cohort would be developed. If it could not be funded through NLC then they would seek to fund it through LiG. Again, this aligned with the Co-leaders' beliefs to get and keep the focus of NLC activity close to classroom practice. This was also being reinforced in messages from the Department of Education and LEA. This intensified an existing issue for schools.

### Dealing with the outcomes of short- and long-term leadership decisions

The time 'out of school' for teachers to meet and learn together was a management challenge but also for some students, according to one headteacher, a teacher's absence created an impression of not being valued. The principles of system thinking, such as mutual responsibility and solution generation were reflected in the network leaders' decisions to create these conditions in the first place for staff. However, system thinking in action – moving from the espoused to the principles in practice – is an ongoing negotiation felt by the network leaders. They use trying to create internal school-to-school and LEA coherence as a strategy for coping with the complexity of the network conditions and as a way of increasing the potential for NLC impact across the borough. This is partly alleviated by the size of the network with the Co-leaders' belief that 11 schools is a manageable size – less fragmented. This allows network leaders to set up structures where department heads and cross-subject area department heads to meet together. How they were going to continue this practice appears to mark another phase in their development towards sustainability.

### **Drilling Into the Network for Sustainability**

By the NLCs' year two review – a combination of NLC self-assessment comparing their progress in relation to their original bid and year one review, peer coaching and critical friendship and NLG evaluation processes – Knowsley was endeavoring to embed a focus on teaching and learning through supportive collaborative structures and processes. Through this review process and interviews with the Co-leaders impacts were noted in relation to, for example, the network's learning focus, strategic structures and processes, results and capacity building forms of leadership development. They demonstrate how network leaders are trying to hold an agenda for system thinking in action whilst wrestling with sometimes the wooliness of leadership in these conditions (e.g. attribution of impact).

#### NLC's learning focus, structures and processes

The network headteacher group had sharpened their focus of leadership on teaching and learning. The challenges to meet the requirements of the system's remodelling agenda had provided a further impetus to the focus (How, 2004). This is evidenced now by Tuesday afternoons being timetabled across the network for the next 12 months as professional collaboration time for use by different groups to work within and across schools (e.g. ASTs and lead learners, strategy managers). This sustained opportunity for relationships to develop is evident also with pupils involved in the 14-19 initiative school-to-school collaboration. This change in structure forms the spine for collaboration across and within the schools. This change created by headteachers needs to be tended and fuelled with processes and people who can drive improvement deeper into the network. The idea has come from the headteachers but maintaining this commitment is a challenge because it means that every Tuesday the school will be down on its own internal capacity: and in light of the schools' environment this is potentially significant. Advance notice of activity and the people to be involved goes some way in supporting management of this tension. By bringing the arrangement into the normal rhythm of school life and staggering the release time across groups it formalizes the arrangement. This helps offset headteachers' previous experiences of 'setting up' the arrangement between schools but then it falling through or happening inconsistently. It also sought to infuse clarity of expectation, not just for the promotion of collaboration, but to accelerate the process by minimizing barriers to getting together in the first place (e.g. communication to and fro problems of teachers phoning each other but missing each others' phone calls).

Getting together does not necessarily equate to quality collaboration nor does it guarantee sustainability of the network. Here processes without structures constrain network sustainability. Network leaders comment that the maths event, an important tipping point within the NLC's early development for building momentum, is unsustainable without an understanding of how this activity fits and can be supported by other aspects and areas of the network. For example, what will the LEA lead on? What will the NLC do? How will the network continue to work to the same aim but through a diversity of approaches? To this end action research, as one approach, has been identified as a key engine for internal and lateral leadership change. The network employed in September 2004 a dedicated Research Officer who supports the development of action research with teachers. The group known as SPARK (Secondary Practitioners Action Research Knowsley) has published 'More than a Diamond – Evidence-based Practice in Knowsley Schools'. Teachers volunteer to participate in this group which connects with a new middle leadership group within the NLC and Knowsley network more broadly.

### School performance

*We have encouraged innovation by increasing teachers' repertoires to respond to student needs and thus increased their confidence. The quality of teaching and learning has improved considerably and there are many excellent teachers: this has had a huge effect on student attainment (Year 2 Review, Co-leader)*

Three schools have had very successful OfSTED inspections in the past year. However, the complexity of connecting NLC-specific activity directly to teacher and pupil impact is a recognised tension for the network leaders as they try to balance their need to get on and improve the conditions in schools with recognition of the broader political environment where funding bodies have a similar need to demonstrate their effectiveness to government. One strategy for the network is to more closely locate activity and focus with a particular group within the network (e.g. learning strategy managers).

### Distribution of school leadership

The network leaders have created and are developing new roles and groups which interconnect across the NLC. Wrapping increased external support round internal changes is evident through such activity as all school leaders and school leadership teams (90+ staff by September 2004) participating in the NCSL Developing Capacity for Sustained Improvement programme.

A key group are learning strategy managers. This middle leadership group build internal capacity to the network and create new threads and knots within the system through which new relationships and processes can be developed and exercised. They serve an operational function, such as a point of connection for lead learners and monitoring individual school implementation progress on network-wide priorities, and a strategic function across the schools as, for example, through the half-termly meetings of the 11 strategy managers with the network's seconded lead headteacher, LEA representative and NLC Co-leaders. The learning from the activities of this and other groups creates a positive pressure for network leaders within school and the LEA to listen and act on the learning. For example, in Knowsley this group undertook an assessment of where the expertise lay across the network. For the first time as a collective group of schools and the LEA they have a clear understanding of how many ASTs there are and what expertise there is across the network.

Policies and partnerships that have the potential to pull against rather than with each other is a constant dynamic to be managed by network leaders – where does the drive for change come from? The generation together of outcomes of what each child knows and can expect to get from teaching and learning from Knowsley has a particular emphasis of it coming from the teachers – building up and out rather than down and in. This philosophy in practice has implications for headteachers and LEA staff to act as facilitators and brokers of change. It has implications for teachers and other staff who may have developed a tacit understanding that change is 'done to' and not 'with' – thus reinforcing a dependency culture. School-to-school teaching and learning policies (where there were ones) were shared and critiqued with a view to developing an overarching policy framework. The premise was that this would further bridge connections between schools, sharpen their attention as a group of schools to essential areas of focus and still allow for individual school flexibility with respect to their own stage of development. However, the success of this distributed form of leadership, such as the learning strategy managers, also brings with it the risk of fracturing under the weight and scale of initiatives. So, while the leadership capacity may have expanded to incorporate another tier within schools, unless the network leaders attend to the previous impact areas of focus, structures and processes sustainability is comprised.

## **Towards an understanding of system thinkers in action**

I am cautious to draw conclusions about network leadership from this one NLC accumulated portrait. Rather I come back to my purpose of attempting to develop and convey a more detailed account of network leadership: to illuminate conditions of possibility and constraint. This is particularly important in light of criticisms in the literature, as mentioned in the introduction, about leadership literature often being detached from the contextual forces at play. So too is it relevant if we are to develop a deeper understanding of 'system thinkers in action'. With this caveat in mind I notice some recurring themes in the accounts from network leaders in Knowsley, such as, dealing with complexity and the consequences of decisions made. System thinkers in action are in a constant dialectic around the dimensions of:

**Strategy** – views and practice in NLCs of 'vertical and horizontal' and 'past, present, future' relationships. Attention to strategy may alleviate the pressure on Co-leaders to facilitate every aspect of a network.

**Capacity-building** – the development of conditions that enhance school-to-school learning (e.g. people, structures, processes, places, results). Building support and inquiry into the NLC program is also crucial if they are to grow.

**Sustainability** – the extent to which there is a 'platform' (e.g. a critical mass of people and activity), 'maturity' and 'embedded' activity (e.g. replication; rolling), and 'viability' (e.g. moral and efficacy dimensions to resource development, distribution and impact).

I would like to now take each in turn, and discuss briefly the issues, in light of findings to date from other NLC network leader interviews across the country and program-wide Spring Inquiry and Annual Review reports. These three dimensions to system thinking in action provide a way of understanding what is happening and how the leaders are going about their leadership. It also may provide a way of surfacing some of the silences (e.g. power-knowledge relationships) in network leadership. My premise is that better understanding of network leader, particularly co-leader, learning and development may also provide further insight into other forms of collaborative and distributed leadership within networks.

## **Emergent learning about co-leadership learning and development – strategy**

Knowsley already had a history of collaboration supported through a shared empathy for the type of conditions that they and pupils experienced. While this enhanced the potential for the NLC philosophy and approach to be embraced, it still requires leadership to make it happen. The situation of a change in co-leadership for Knowsley was a common experience in many NLCs. It raises a number of questions. *To what extent are NLCs ready and equipped for 'co-leadership'? Are some models of 'co-leadership' more resilient than others? If so in what conditions and for what reasons?* This has implications for the recruitment and retention of this form of leadership – co-leadership – in NLCs and potentially other network forms in the system (e.g. PSLN).

Co-leaders, as in the case with Knowsley, focus on getting structures and processes in place as a means to change views and practice of teaching and learning in the classroom. How they view themselves in that activity is inter-dependent with the conditions of the system that highlight implicit and explicit norms, values and beliefs about leadership. In interviews, co-leaders refer to different views of themselves (e.g. 'facilitator'; 'director'; 'co-ordinator'; 'leader'; 'coach'), with 'facilitator' being the most common term of reference in their approach to co-leading. Emerging particularly in discussions of headteacher co-leader experiences, this may reflect an intuitive or explicit strategy for dealing with the contradiction inherent in leading in a network and leading in a school in terms of 'leadership' and 'authority'. In a school the Headteacher has virtually the total responsibility and the authority that accompanies this to make things happen. In a network, while they have the role co-leader, they do not have the authority seeing instead the responsibility for co-leadership with all those in the network. How these new relationships might impact on the future of existing leadership roles and relationships is not just a question for in-school leadership relationships but also for relationships beyond the school gates.

In many cases, co-leaders find themselves leading networks with people they may have known professionally but not known directly as colleagues. So while co-leadership is viewed positively as a concept and practice, it does bring its own form of uncertainty. For example, *how* do we develop and sustain co-leadership of a network? This uncertainty may also be viewed positively as a way of trying new approaches to leadership (e.g. collaborative inquiry-type models of leadership learning and development). However, there appears to be less consideration coming from within the co-leadership relationship of what each member brings to the co-leadership. Co-leaders, in advice to new co-leaders, suggest being more explicit about what they felt they could bring to the relationship. They ask new Co-leaders to consider what they want to develop from co-leading and how they think they could share their learning with another prospective new co-leader. The need for this reflection is clear in this sort of comment: "I wouldn't have the faintest idea where their strengths and weaknesses lie, even though I've been meeting with most of them for a year" (Co-leader). This advice comes as a result of an emerging taxonomy of co-leadership recruitment (volunteering; nominated; organic; apprenticeship). These origins of co-leadership set up potential constraints and possibilities for the development of co-leadership, and for the future sustainability of this form of leadership in the network.

All Co-leaders have experienced situations that involve adapting the ways they are co-leading. As in the case with Knowsley, this may include a change in the organisational role of one of the Co-leaders, OfSTED demands or a change in school timetable structure. These forced adaptations resulted in either temporary or, and a number of cases, sustained changes to the co-leadership (e.g. two became 'two' in name only). Discussion of these situations highlighted what co-leaders thought it meant to be co-leaders and how this view might or might not translate into practice. For example;

*We don't dictate to each other what we have got to do. We offer to do it...we make sure that [it's] done and if necessary then we do use some of the funding...it has worked for us and we all pull our weight. And I don't think you can have a sleeping partner* (Co-leader).

The number of co-leaders will vary from network to network, but there seems a strong view that having more than one is important. So too is it important that they are able to work together well. This seems obvious, but given the origin of many of the co-leader relationships, it is not necessarily an explicit consideration. If co-leaders are going for a formal model then three seems to be potentially more robust than two, because if one co-leader is absent then the other two can still meet and keep the wheels turning. Co-leaders believe that to develop their role, the explicit involvement of headteachers is crucial. This can serve simultaneously to enable and to hold up progress of the network in a number of ways. It may facilitate internal school structures and processes, provide exposure and a broader system connection, particularly important for non-headteacher co-leaders (Kubiak and Burtram, 2004). However, it may also potentially reinforce a dependency on institutionalised structures of approval. Because the co-leader role is seen as so pivotal to the network, models of co-leadership should also consider how different perspectives (e.g. a cross-phase network) are going to be involved.

The uncertainty of the role of co-leader is seen as an advantage because it provides a way of breaking 'old' models and concepts of leadership. As one Co-leader puts it, *"...when there's more than you, then more questions are asked, more thoughts are provoked, more ideas are thrown on the table and so co-leadership could really work well in that kind of situation. I suppose I don't mean to have three head teachers of a school but imagine if you had three schools that worked together, you could share ideas, share work but also there'd be more ideas to share"*. There is no job description for a co-leader. Co-leaders suggest developing a description based on a set of guiding principles rather than specific tasks, because each NLC will have its own history, learning focus and circumstances, This may be useful in dealing with expectations of themselves and of and from others. Taking a strategic approach to co-leadership also has implications for the building of capacity beyond the co-leader relationship.

### **Emergent Programme Learning – Network Leadership Building Capacity**

By the time the NLC program reached its 'year one review', most networks were operating with some form of strategic leadership team. As part of the review, network leaders created a visual depiction of the NLC. Like Knowsley, for many co-leaders it was the first time they had depicted their network in this way. A network leadership event in November 2003 used a principle of *inquiry* to drive its process. The emphasis was not so much on the product, but on what co-leaders were learning along the way, and what as a result of the process they were going to do with this knowledge. For example, some elected to undertake the same process with different groups within the network to assist with reviewing and action planning; others revisited their leadership values. For some, the inquiry allowed them to generate metaphors for the relations in the network and to re-think views of inclusion and exclusion in the co-leadership relations. The feedback from this inquiry was used to introduce the event as part of the year one review of NLC development.

The majority of these strategic groups, if they are not actively involved in the delivery of adult learning, have now set up some form of feedback loop so that they can manage and monitor its development. This also serves to expand the notion of co-leadership as it helps to deal with issues of fragmentation and isolation. However, what the review also showed was network leaders' dissatisfaction with 'activity' as the perceived output and outcome of being in a network. This was also born out in the experiences of the Knowsley network leaders with their maths event being deemed successful at that point in time but with potentially no route for it to gain traction within the life of the network – thus driving it into a cul-de-sac. Network leaders, from across the program, identify that activity needs to connect to larger numbers of people, connect to finding the 'right fit' with regard to approach and

process and connect to knowing that it is making a difference for adults and pupils. These four themes were reflected in the types of questions network leaders were asking:

Theme	Questions being asked by network leaders in their year 1 review
Increasing reach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ How can we increase the numbers and learning of more people in the network to sustain network activity and distribute leadership opportunities?</li> <li>✓ How will we ensure the engagement and understanding of all leaders?</li> <li>✓ How do we facilitate seamless learning, where learning from seminars translates into practice in schools?</li> </ul>
Models/approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ How can we develop our partnership meetings with opportunities for 'learning as leaders'?</li> <li>✓ How will the network maximise opportunities for staff at every level to learn collaboratively about leadership?</li> </ul>
Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Does the development of 'Lead learners' challenge our current structures and styles?</li> <li>✓ How do the skills of facilitation contribute to developing a true community of mature learning groups?</li> <li>✓ What is the process for developing leaders in schools in NLCs?</li> <li>✓ What can schools do to help students become better learners?</li> <li>✓ How do you measure or provide evidence of leadership learning?</li> </ul>

To build capacity network leaders see a need to pay attention to the flow of activity and learning between school-to-school adult learning. Where effective this reflects a multi-directional flow – although this may have components of uni-directional activity but not as the sole strategy (e.g. formal training provided by the Co-leaders to the theme groups, or Higher Education Institute professional continuing professional development (CPD) on Assessment for Learning). To facilitate inclusive participation, NLCs are generating structures and processes that aim to create opportunities that legitimise connections between people from different schools within the network. The program inquiries and the Knowsley case reflect examples of developing horizontal *and* vertical activity. They also reflect intersection points that serve to support strategic, moral and sustainable aims, through:

- ✓ 'cross-phase' perspectives (e.g. network steering group; co-leadership);
- ✓ 'cross-people' roles (e.g. pupils and adults);
- ✓ 'cross-network' activities (e.g. whole network INSET on learning walks; school-to-school learning walks; pupil conferences; joint super-learning days).
- ✓ 'cross-networks' perspectives (e.g. network to network; international)

Evident in the year one review were specific programmes such as Collaborative Leadership Learning Groups and other leadership structures (for example, Lead Learner Groups, SIG Co-ordinator Groups) and roles (Lead Learners) which provide the visible medium through which the intent behind distributed leadership can be realised.

Building capacity does have resource implications for individual schools and when headteachers disconnect from the network their staff can disconnect as well (Kubiak and Bertram, 2004). The year one review reinforced the achievements made by the networks and the learning possible for the headteachers through active involvement. However, there were also regular references to the need to win headteachers over and to establish buy-in to the networked learning for themselves or their teachers. This demand must be balanced with the way in which the central position of headteachers can become a bottleneck. For Knowsley this issue of 'bottleneck' surfaced with their middle tier leaders in schools – not as an issue of power as implied by the other program findings in relation to headteachers but as potential point of fracture. This was raised by a Co-leader who saw that the group's 'strength' was also simultaneously going to be its 'weakness' – its close connections to the classroom, operational and strategic functions was becoming increasingly attractive as a source to build capacity. However, this comes at a cost and network leaders are turning their attention to issues of sustainability.

### **Emergent Program Learning – Sustainability**

Co-leadership, as a specific form of leadership in networks, can act as a more holistic self-corrective device for monitoring change. This is having knock-on effects in both the purpose and approach to the development of 'new' and 'old' leadership relationships. Sometimes, however, these effects are unrecognized without the application of what network members are describing as powerful learning methodologies – collaborative leadership learning groups and learning walks supported by protocols and key foci.

As the year two review and inquiries into adult learning reflected, 'time to meet' emerged as a major consideration for teachers. Activities were often scheduled as 'twilight sessions' sometimes additional (although voluntary) to other activities. Blocks of half-day or full-day learning (e.g. learning walks) were also identified as useful. 'Focus weeks' and 'super-learning days', during which the timetables were collapsed to enable the pupils of network schools to work together, were also reported as successful. Regularity of meetings was seen by some as critical to embedding cross-school co-operation. A key finding from the inquiries was that the requirement to negotiate school-to-school continuing professional development (CPD) and adult learning activity at a network-wide level draws the network away from *ad hoc* arrangements and into the dimension of strategic school planning. The arrangements we found to have the greatest impact were implemented through meetings and activities that take place during the school day. (Spring Inquiry Report, 2004)

Networks and the forms of leadership within them (e.g. co-leadership) have the potential to challenge one-dimensional and undifferentiated categories like headteachers; pupils; teachers in system discourse. Co-leaders saw themselves as the 'doers' of the network, the 'one-stop-shop' for the responsibility of actions related to the NLC. For the majority of the Co-leaders, this seems to be related to how they became a Co-leader – for example, through writing the bid or being volunteered by colleagues or approached by a Headteacher. While this attitude to co-leading may get the NLC moving, it is proving an unsustainable model of co-leadership when framed as an 'additional responsibility': a notion that is replicated and reinforced in the system currently of role (teaching assistants), program ('plus-one') and network configurations ('extended schools').

## **Concluding Thoughts**

'System thinkers in action' brings together moral and inter-dependent thinking to network leadership relations. The 'in action' part to this frame helps to ground what is espoused by the system thinking principles, such as, to move between short- and long-term but with a greater focus on the long-term and to broaden the depth of relationships and the nature of these relationships. It's the 'in action' part that draws our attention to particular sites in networks – the enactment of leadership being one of these sites. In particular notions and practice of distributed leadership that move beyond the tier of co-leadership in networks – which have until recently been most commonly associated with headteachers. Our interest and energy to understand the impact of distributed notions and practice of leadership is important as these are perceived as closer to the action of the classroom and therefore children – indeed we see this same sense of urgency from the network leaders in their strategic and capacity building endeavours.

In this paper I suggest that developing our understanding of co-leader experiences in Networked Learning Communities is one route to deepening our understanding of other leadership forms and practice in networks. Facilitating the conditions for distributed leadership is a system issue and concern. So improvement efforts in school-to-school networks, as the example from Knowsley and other co-leader findings show, cannot be considered in isolation from the local and global forces at play. This is a key logic behind system thinkers in action. However, in the realities of network leadership the dimensions of this frame in action, such as attention to the strategic, ebb and flow in their emphasis which sometimes may compromise focus on moral interdependencies. Here the questions about what works and what does not work can get a bit woolly. For example, conditions in the system being used to explain away a course of action. This is because even equity-minded reforms, such as NLCs, have power relations that provide conditions of possibility and constraint. These conditions shape how network leaders come to understand what constitutes success.

Hence reconfiguring notions of leadership as facilitative of change in this context should not be seen as neutral; even notions of collective agency still have 'rules of engagement' that regulate the nature of a given structure. If we believe that 'making a difference' can come from anyone or any group anywhere in a system – such is the premise of distributed leadership – then this has implications for relations within the system. As people from NLCs are finding there are shifts in their relationships from, for example, working alone with independent multiple agendas to inter-dependencies with a concept of being of '*like minds*'. These changes also have implications for how practice, policy and research is placed, positioned and enacted with regard to school improvement in an increasingly networked environment. This is not about setting up demarcation points within the system. These may serve to shore up internal coherence, but this may be at the expense of potential bridges with other relations in the system. Here, institutional 'atrocious stories' are allowed to be perpetuated, unchecked and unchallenged. Network leaders as system thinkers in action are finding that to go against these deeply entrenched structures is to take a risk – to take learning and relationships beyond 'strap-lines' to genuine engagement where values and beliefs about what constitutes 'success' may carry different meanings (e.g. efficiency; effectiveness; excellence; equity and diversity). Serious intent to develop new leadership roles and opportunities, and improve the ability of existing leaders to manage change and innovation with new leadership approaches (of which co-leadership is one) is a holistic concern. To this end system thinking in action may be a helpful way to further explore the impact of leadership development and learning in networks.

## References

- Bond, K. and Farrar, M.; and Berry, H., Godfrey, V. and Ling, D. (2005) 'Community Leadership Network – more than an aspiration'. Paper given at the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI), Conference, Barcelona.
- Bottery, M. (2004) *The Challenges of Educational Leadership*, London, Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Carter, K. and Franey, T. (2004) 'System Thinkers in Action; Programme and policy perspectives on developing collaborative enquiry-based leadership and learning in networked contexts'. Paper given at CARN.
- Day, C., Harris, A., Hadfield, M., Tolley, H. and Beresford, J. (2000) *Leading schools in times of change*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- CBR (2003) Report. UK.
- Department of Education and Skills (DfES) (2003) *Every Child Matters*. Green Paper, DfES/0672/2003. and *Every Child Matters: Next Steps* (2004), London, Stationery Office.
- Department of Education and Skills (DfES) (2004a) *Department for Education and Skills: Five year Strategy for Children and Learners*. London, July, Department for Education and Skills, 115 pages.
- Department of Education and Skills (DfES) (2004b) *Primary National Strategy, Primary Strategy Learning Networks*. DfES/0869/2004. London, [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk).
- DfES (2004c) 'More money for schools in the North West', 30 November, press release. <http://www.gnn.gov.uk/content/detail.asp?ReleaseID=137357&NewsAreaID=112&NavigatedFromSearch=True>
- Fullan, M. (2004) 'Leadership and sustainability'. (Hot Seat Paper), Urban Leadership Community, England, National College for School Leadership (NCSL).
- Flood, R. L. (1999) *Rethinking the fifth discipline*. London, Routledge.
- Hadfield, M. Kubiak, C and O'Leary, D. (2004) *The First Year of Networked Learning: an analysis of the Networked Learning Communities year 1 self reviews*. National College for School Leadership (NCSL), Networked Learning Group.
- Harris, A. (2004) Distributed leadership and school improvement – leading or misleading? *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 32(1), 11-24.
- Hopkins, D. and Levin, B. (2001) 'Government policy and school development'. *School Leadership and Management*, 20(1), 15-30.
- Jackson, D. (2004) Networked Learning Communities: Characteristics of 'networked learning' – what are we learning? Paper prepared for the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement, 'Building Bridges for Sustainable School Improvement'. 6<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> January 2004, Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

- Kubiak, C. and Bertram, J. (2004) 'The growth and development of school-based networked learning communities', British Educational Research Association (BERA) Conference (Manchester 14<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> September).
- Lambert, L. (2002) Beyond instructional leadership: A framework for shared leadership. *Educational Leadership*, 59(8), 37-40.
- Leithwood, K. and Levin, B. (2004) Approaches to the evaluation of leadership programs and leadership effects. Working paper (February), prepared for England's Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 30 pages.
- Lupton, R. (2004) 'School leadership in context'. Paper given at School Leadership and Social Justice, Annual Seminar, 4<sup>th</sup> November, Institute of Physics, Portland Place, London.
- National College for School Leadership (2003) *Annual Review of Research*. Nottingham, England, National College for School Leadership, AR2003.
- National Remodelling Team (2004), London, National College for School Leadership.
- OfSTED (1999) and (2003)
- Shields, C. M. (2004) Dialogic Leadership for Social Justice: Overcoming Pathologies of Silence. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40(1), 109-132.
- Smithers, R. (education ed) (2004) 'Inspection of schools to be revolutionised'. *The Guardian*, UK, Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> November, p 15.
- West-Burnham, (2003) Education, leadership and the community. In Gelsthorpe, T. and West-Burnham, J. (eds) *Educational leadership and the community*, London, Pearson Education.
- Woods, R. and Jones, A. (2005) 'Making space to learn: the development of the NCSL Facilitation for Collaborative Leadership Learning Programme'. Paper given at the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI), 2-5 January, Barcelona.
- Wohlstetter, P. *et al.* (2003) Improving schools through networks: A new approach to urban school reform. *Educational Policy*, 17(4), 399-430.

## **Methods**

Key data sources for this paper draw on empirical evidence from both programme-wide and NLC leadership specific enquiry and research. These being:

### **A Spring Inquiry**

The Spring Inquiry 2004 set out to bring together narratives from network members who had taken part in what the co-leaders described as the most 'networked' example of adult learning that had taken place to-date. These narratives were constructed around two conceptual frameworks. The first of these was based on a recently completed EPPE (2004) review of effective collaborative CPD. The second was based on a development of Shulman's model of professional knowledge. Together these two frameworks provided a common language for the facilitation team from the NLC programme to describe the adult learning processes that had been used to network the learning and a means of assessing how this learning had impacted upon the practitioners involved. Over 100 narratives were collected by the facilitation team and a meta-analysis of this was carried out using Nvivo software.

### **The Annual Review**

Three main sources of primary data were drawn upon in the analysis for the Annual Review. The first of these was a submission from every network which revisited their original application, indicating which activities had never been initiated or abandoned, which were still to go ahead, and which had been completed. The second source was an achievements template, which was filled out by networks themselves; this used the 'levels of learning'<sup>4</sup> framework to identify key achievements in year one. Finally, a third submission from the networks which offered the opportunity to elaborate on why they had altered their plans during the first year of network life was analysed. Data was coded in to fine-grained groupings to aid analysis using NVivo, a qualitative software package.

Secondary data sources that were drawn upon were data already available to the research team detailing phase of education (infant, primary, or mixed), the size of the network (split in to quartiles) and the pre-existing status of each network (new or established partnerships).

### **Interviews with network leaders**

In addition to the informal learning from repeated contact with network leaders over the course of the programme to date we have also conducted a number of research projects. This particular paper draws from two of these projects related to running a NLC (i.e. one strand within the programme's research strategy). This data source comprised 33 semi-structured audio-taped and transcribed interviews with network leaders across 12 NLCs. Networks were identified through reading the Spring Enquiry reports (2003, 2004) and informal conversations with network leaders and Networked Learning Group Facilitators at various network events. They represent a spread of geographical; school-phase and NLC leadership perspectives from across England. Findings were collated and analysed using a thematic saturation technique and triangulated using other sources of information about the network from the Programme (e.g. The Annual Review).

---

<sup>4</sup> This breaks down learning in to seven different levels: 'Pupil learning', 'Adult learning', 'Leadership Learning', 'School-wide learning', 'School-to-school learning', 'Network-wide learning', 'Network-to-network learning'.