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Exploring the boundaries of the system

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Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other learning with each other learning on behalf of each other

Leading beyond the school



Outward-facing leadership
with a system perspective

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“*Learning is at the heart of school reform... an important aspect of this learning is that it occurs in collaboration as people work together to make sense of their world.*”
Erschler et al, 2001

We are in a time of transition in education in England. Marked by the early success of large-scale national reform strategies and a plethora of ‘outside in’ change approaches, there is a recognition that medium and longer-term change requires different approaches. The challenge for the future is a capacity-building one, to “*find ways to embed accountability and capacity building in the educational culture*” (Earl et al, 2003). This requires a new kind of leadership which transcends the boundaries of individual schools – outward-facing leadership with a system perspective.

The underlying premise for this think piece is that if we are to respond to a future in which complexity and change are endemic, then tightly-drawn central strategies are inflexible and brittle, while shared purpose through capacity building endures. In order to engender such shared purpose though, new forms of leadership are required. It will mean more ‘adaptive leadership’, which forges relationships between the wider system and participants in the system. It requires leaders with a system perspective – “*leaders who get experience in linking to other parts of the system who in turn develop other leaders with similar characteristics*” (Fullan, 2004) – where leadership is enacted as a learning strategy which encourages collaborative, adaptive work.

Pause for thought...?
This “*demands learning, demands experimentation and difficult conversations*” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). What forms of practice will foster such ways of working and what models of leadership do we have to build from?

System change

In order for leadership to impact across the system, there needs also to be an alignment between leadership development and the wider reform agenda, but in ways that allow emerging leaders to take control of the reform agenda from within their own context. To use directional descriptors, it means supplementing ‘outside-in’ change with ‘inside-out’ and ‘school-to-school’ approaches, and this bottom-up and lateral orientation requires different leadership norms.

Local interpretation involves school leaders shifting from a ‘one-size fits-all-approach’, to one where the system flexes around the needs of pupils and the challenges of local context. This, in turn, requires the development of collaborative processes congruent with being open to ‘possibility thinking’ – trying out new options and identifying other possibilities. At its optimum this involves:

- collective action within communities
- individual members co-designing or co-creating with others
- harnessing everyone’s creative ability and not just that of the elite
- building relationships between people and their world (Dyer & Craft, 1997)

Pause for thought...?
‘Possibility thinking’ is an integral aspect of leadership which is adaptive in practice, and seeks with others to find solutions which lie outside the current way of operating. Leadership for the future will require the application of ‘possibility thinking’ as a way of tackling the adaptive dimensions of the political, social and technical challenges posed by the prospect of system-level change.

Leadership development – the art of doing

It is widely recognised that most leadership learning is situated and takes place “*while leaders are doing the job, through engaging actively in leadership practice*” (NCSL, 2004). As Fullan describes, the mark of good leadership for headteachers during their tenure is how many good leaders they are creating. It is a role for school leaders which endorses the diversity of people’s talents and skills, and recognises that leadership is vested in more than an organisational role. Educational rather than institutional in its focus, this form of leadership is exercised through the liberation of talents within a participatory framework. It “*allows fluidity and flexibility between people and alignment which moves this distributed function in a common direction*” (Jackson, 2002).

NCSL’s strategy, *Learning to Lead* (2004), proposed six key areas for leadership development which support this development of lateral capacity – where leadership learning is focused on increasing the number of skilled leaders in a school and increasing leadership learning opportunities both within and between schools. This configuration of leadership for learning has a number of inter-related strands:

- a shared purpose and aspiration for pupil learning
- opportunities for teachers to collaborate and problem-solve together
- individual and collective responsibility for pupil learning
- clear links between teaching, learning and pupil achievement
- leadership focused upon learning – every member of the school can learn
- the school operating as a part of a wider educational community

Leadership capacity – the art of learning

The potential for building internal capacity through the development of schools as learning communities has been well documented. School networks as learning communities have gone one step further. They draw not only from the potential


leadership capacity which exists within the boundaries of one school, but also from the leadership learning dynamic which exists when schools work together as a network in the act of joint problem-solving and the shared responsibility for contextualised action. Networks of schools learning together are creating a powerful context for “*participants sharing participation and responsibility for the problems generated by the system and for developing creative solutions to them*” (Whitaker, 1993).

The implication of this is leaders who close the ‘knowing-doing gap’. Their ability resides in having collaborative and collective competence. This in turn equips them to create effective problem-solving and implementation processes to deal with highly contextualised and complex problems. Michael Fullan, once again, states that sustainability requires continuous improvement, adaptation and collective problem-solving in the face of complex challenges that keep arising. This, he suggests, requires ‘deep learning’, and deep learning means collaborative cultures of enquiry that alter the culture of learning so that leaders together can solve difficult or adaptive problems.

Pause for thought...?
Leaders with an outward-facing and system perspective need not only develop the collaborative competence for problem-solving, but also the capacity to engage in ‘deep learning’ through collaborative enquiry. Their potential is to work with others interdependently, and through their collaborative work to encourage ‘inside out’ solutions – networked solutions to complex issues.

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 This think piece is drawn from the paper ‘*System thinkers in action; programme and policy perspectives*’, 2004. To download a copy of the paper, which contains a full bibliography, please visit ‘Nexus links’ at: www.ncsl.org.uk/nexus





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Shaking up the system... Network movers

*Edwina Grant, London Borough of Redbridge; Mike Sykes, Derby City NLC
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Network movers

Liz Reid, Chief Executive of the Specialist Schools Trust, has described networks as being ‘the proving ground for system leadership’. Emerging evidence suggests that networks have created environments in which school leaders – at all levels – are responding to the challenge of leading development work and learning beyond their own schools. In particular, many seem to be displaying the strategic thinking, moral purpose and wider engagement that Michael Fullan and others have associated with system leadership. We firmly believe this is what will be required if education is to deliver our ultimate dream of ‘raising the bar and closing the gap’; achieving ‘excellence and equity’ while making a reality of the aspirations of *Every Child Matters*.

In an increasingly networked education system, and with the development of *Every Child Matters*, the ability of organisations and the people who lead them to work together effectively beyond the boundaries of their individual institutions is becoming more and more important. How will these skills be fostered? Who are the people who will be in the vanguard of such significant developments? **Edwina Grant, Mike Sykes** and **Jo Cottrell** share their experiences of developing an outward-facing perspective in their leadership practices.



Edwina Grant
Recently appointed as Corporate Director of Education and Children’s Strategy in 2005 formerly Director of Education, London Borough of Redbridge and a member of the NCSL LEA Forum.

“I see things differently, I bring ideas... some of the London Challenge work I did is relevant; keeping local authorities close to schools through establishing networks, designing and agreeing new roles... As I am building a new team, I am trying not to focus only on Children’s Services, but build on the good practice that’s already here in the city. I see lots of potential networks in leisure and neighbourhood working.”

Mike Sykes
Key Stage 4 Co-ordinator, Merrill College, Derby City NLC

“I got the call to do this interview as I was sitting by the river bank on a fishing trip with some 19 pupils... Well, someone’s got to do it.”

When I joined T. P. Riley School in Walsall in 1999, I was one of the co-leaders of a network of secondary schools that combined under-performance with low teacher expectations. Teaching and learning were staid, boring and old-fashioned. Pupils’ behaviour and attainment were well below standard. Since then T. P. Riley has come out of Special Measures and is now the Walsall Academy. So what made the difference?

Becoming part of the NLC programme was a terrific boost to our confidence. Ideas, ways of doing things differently, flowed through our schools. We felt energised to make changes to our pedagogy – to spark the changes which were needed to take the school out of Special Measures. Following our first launch event, we established a model of voluntary leadership where a small cadre of staff trialled a new teaching style. Then they ran whole-school training, which led to everyone agreeing to experiment that week.

We decided to come back as a staff team to evaluate the teaching and to go a big step further by looking at the impact on learning through student questionnaires. The key ingredient was us all agreeing to collaborate in what was essentially an enquiry where we took risks together.

Over the course of a term, we used the model to try out a range of teaching and learning styles, and the impact was tangible, visible: inspectors reported on it; pupils’ behaviour improved. We came out of Special Measures. HMI reported that we had “a sophisticated technique for developing effective teaching and learning.” Last year I was appointed to the senior leadership team at Merrill



College in Derby, also a school in challenging circumstances. My experience of the Walsall network was an explicit part of my application. Again, the school was judged to require Special Measures in 2004, but I was confident that I could apply the same models of learning by maximising the support of our NLC. Merrill is part of Derby City NLC which has 10 primary and secondary schools, including post-16 provision. Its cross-phase nature is significant because it has enabled us to use ideas from infant and junior schools. Pupils are used as researchers to help all schools to learn about the impact of changes to teaching and learning. The transfer of teaching and learning skills is faster because of the diversity of a cross-phase network.

This year has been our first as part of the Behaviour Improvement Project (BIP) and we have used an integrated services team of health, social services, youth offending professionals and ourselves working together. Networking has been the key component. When we are all in the room together sharing in the planning of provision for children – the heart of our profession – then the depth of communication is strengthened. Real change in the learning experience of children can happen.

Networking is the key for schools in challenging circumstances. I’m totally committed to working in schools at the sharp end, where the impact on individual pupils and their families can be truly transformational.

Jo Cottrell
Headteacher of Halterworth Primary School, Romsey, Hampshire, formerly Facilitator and Team Leader in NCSL’s Networked Learning Group.

Before joining NCSL I was a headteacher in Dorset and co-leader of Dorchester Area Schools Partnership (DASP) – one of the first Networked Learning Communities. Now, when I reflect on the last two years working on the NLC programme, I realise that all the time I’ve been in the College I’ve been back-referencing, processing new learning and applying it to where I came from, and projecting ahead to what I might be doing in the future. That desire to apply new knowledge and experience has got stronger and stronger, culminating in my applying for my second headship. I wanted to test my new learning on the ground.

People say ‘going back’ into headship, but I feel I’m moving on with a much more global sense of school leadership and its impact on pupil achievement. The textbook for new heads will tell you to do nothing the first term, but our Ofsted inspection is due in two terms and the business of self-evaluation cannot be postponed. There is no time for warming up to the job.

What I’ve acquired through my role in the NLC is a set of accelerated exercises, activities and tools – processes and an understanding about how to build relationships, deepen adult

learning and encourage thoughtful collaborative practice. I’m looking forward to self-evaluation – it holds no fears for me. I see it as a key diagnostic tool or audit to demonstrate that every child matters in this school and in the local community.

In preparation for my new headship I have interviewed every member of staff (including the cook and the caretaker) for 45 minutes each. I asked them to reflect not only on the school’s strengths and weaknesses, but also their wish lists; their dream of how things could be improved and what they would like to see happen. I wanted to model that this is an inclusive school and that everyone has a voice in this process. Every person matters: not just every child.

Another preparatory task has been to send a questionnaire to all the parents and governors – a first for the school – and I have had a high return rate, with lots of written feedback. I challenged them to consider the quality of learning and how it could be improved. Through these preparatory activities, I have already been able to identify people who have energy and ideas that they have been waiting to unleash.

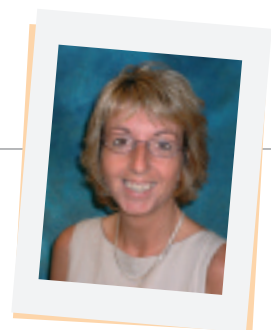
I know how to work with groups who want to work differently and to break away from traditional models of adult learning. I’ve been able to draw on my facilitator experience of working with staff from other schools on learning walks, research lessons and pupil voice – processes I’ve been part of designing, piloting and developing collaboratively with networks.

I’ve also interviewed the local authority advisers, and on my second headship the dialogue is more equal. I feel I am coming to the table with a full briefcase of knowledge to challenge what they say about the school. This is a conversation about what will be best for the school. I am the client commissioning interventions, not just the recipient of analyses developed externally. I am looking forward to a collaborative model of engagement between the local authority and the school.

But my first priority is to build a professional learning community within my own school, which I think is a pre-requisite of effective networked learning.

Outward-facing leadership for me is being in a position from within to influence what is happening on a wider scale. It is a move away from government directives to enabling people to grow the change from within the system intelligently.

For further details of the system leadership practice narrative produced by Jo Cottrell and colleagues please visit ‘Nexus links’ at www.ncsl.org.uk/nexus





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Energising 14-19 the networked way

*Jon Coles, DfES, Wendy Allen & Brian Wood, South Cumbria Secondary Learning
Innovation Partnership NLC & Sarah Graham, SWAN NLC, Northampton*

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In this account Jon Coles, Director of Qualifications and Young People, DfES, provides a national policy perspective on the reform of curriculum and qualifications 14-19, and points to the need for outward-facing leadership which enables effective collaborative practices to be shared across the system. In response, network leaders **Sarah Graham, Wendy Allen** and **Brian Wood** share their experiences of developing local network-based solutions to the key challenges of leading 14-19 beyond their individual schools and across their local education communities in Northamptonshire and Cumbria.



Of the key challenges posed by the *14-19 Education and Skills* white paper, Jon Coles identifies three areas of immediate significance:

- 1 raising achievement and attainment for young people currently in the education system
- 2 implementing qualification reform, notably specialised Diplomas
- 3 addressing how local delivery supports the success of every young person in the short, medium and long term

Jon sees this as a big and challenging operation with long term aims allied with an urgent need for impact in the short term.

“We have to think differently about schools and colleges and how they operate. Increasingly what is on offer to young people cannot be limited to what a single institution can provide. There has to be a broader perspective.”

Our challenge is to look at the ways in which schools, colleges and other education providers can work together productively for all young people.

Jon is clear about who will make this happen. *“Educational reform is all about headteachers, teachers and other professionals who work with young people on the ground. It is essential to reach the education professionals involved, to give them appropriate professional development opportunities that will support their work with, and the success of, their pupils.”*

“We need to enthuse teachers and schools to work together to offer more to young people than any of them could alone. More and different opportunities must be provided to learners in order to meet their varying needs. There are already many examples of young people getting better opportunities because schools, colleges and other providers are working together collegially.” Opportunity has to match need. For many, this involves access to different sorts of learning opportunities and forms of educational provision.

“One-size-fits-all implementation won’t work. It’s about capturing the work of the enthusiasts, the innovative practices which are happening locally and enabling everyone to learn from them.”

This, he admits is a tricky job, requiring subtlety: *“The challenge is to make sure that we capitalise on the energy and enthusiasm generated in developing local solutions, while at the same time, moving this practice to scale. This is a key issue, but one which can be addressed through collaborative, networked approaches, enabling individual educational institutions to learn from and with one another, and where effective practices in implementing 14-19 reform can be shared across the system.”*

Network profile: South Cumbria Secondary Learning Innovation NLC

Our network consists of five secondary schools, one 6th form college, one college of further education and one pupil referral unit working together across a geographically dispersed area on the Furness peninsula of South Cumbria. The network directs its work through a 14-19 development group which promotes a joint approach to learning. A focus on provision for the ‘Furness learner’ emphasises collaboration, student voice and genuine personalised learning.

Key challenges 14–19:
Building pupil aspirations to look at future routes into further education, higher education and employment is a challenge in some schools – we need to build on successes and spread good practice school-to-school. A second challenge is developing a sustainable model for 14-19 provision within the network, something that can be embedded rather than a one off.

- Network-based solutions:**
- Establishing a shared vision for the ‘Furness learner’ and planning a joint approach to 14-19 provision in the area.
 - Developing a shared focus for network activity on raising boys’ achievement, the promotion of student voice, and a co-ordinated enterprise learning entitlement for all students.
 - Moving towards collective provision of applied GCSEs, joint INSET, and common timetabling, which could not have been achieved on an individual school basis.

Wendy Allen says: *“There is a readiness to share good ideas and resources and draw inspiration from others. This is having a real impact on pupil learning where, as a result of the collaboration, applied GCSE course work results are above local norms.”*

Brian Wood, 14-19 Regional Development Manager, thinks the Furness experience demonstrates the importance of *“getting the movers and shakers around the table and building a community around shared principles.”* He recommends *“investing time in building relationships amongst network members to release the energy, enthusiasm and commitment of individuals for working collaboratively.”*

Network profile: South West Area of Northamptonshire (SWAN) NLC

Our network consists of 10 secondary schools working together with one college of further education in a geographically dispersed area in the south west of Northamptonshire. We aim to build a support network of teachers of vocational GCSEs, producing high quality learning materials that enable students to learn no matter where they are. We also want to develop a collaborative approach to leadership and management with high quality professional development for all staff, including aspiring and current middle leaders.

Key challenges 14–19:
Building an excellent, quality assured curriculum with learning and vocational experiences through work-based learning for students. Building partnerships with employers and establishing productive business links. Creating the right sort of professional development provision for those involved in leading curriculum and assessment arrangements 14-19 in vocational subjects.

- Network-based solutions:**
- The SWAN communication tool – an extranet facility which all NLC schools can access to upload and download learning resources and online learning materials.
 - Video conferencing – students having access to curriculum subjects which are not on offer in their own establishments; network staff having an alternative meeting facility.
 - Strategies for joint working on curriculum and assessment for applied GCSEs being rolled out to other subject areas. Supported by middle leadership courses for aspiring and established middle managers.

The key message from SWAN NLC to others involved in leading 14–19 provision is that *“teachers working together across schools can work smarter and not harder, by sharing resources and developing units of work together – particularly for new qualifications.”* Here Sarah Graham recommends *“working towards a distributed model of leadership – involving everyone in all network activities and drawing energy from the bottom up, with top-down support and facilitation. It’s the energy that sustains the network!”*

For more information on the work of the SWAN NLC please visit www.swan-nlc.org.uk

Details of the 14–19 developments in the South Cumbria NLC can be found at www.southcumbria-nlc.org.uk

