Leadership in School Networks: findings from the Networked Learning Communities programme

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The Networked Learning Communities context

The NLC programme has been a major research and development activity of the National College of School Leadership (NCSL). 104 voluntary, funded school networks were set up following a process of bidding and selection operated by a core NCSL team, the Networked Learning Group (NLG). A second tranche of unfunded networks went through a similar bidding process as we began to understand how networked learning operated for the programme's pioneer schools.

Many of our key principles, which were comparatively novel four years ago, are now part of everyday education currency. The central idea of pooling resources, expertise and effort to achieve more together than can be done alone, has fed the development of Primary National Strategy Learning Networks and extended schools and the commitment to collaboration in place of competition informs implementation of the Every Child Matters agenda.

This work began with the premise that network leaders, like school leaders, are essentially focused on the same objective: *"to build the capacity for individuals to flourish, for schools to continually improve and change and for young people to be the best they can be"* (Harris & Lambert 2003: 8). That was the principle that underpinned our thinking at the beginning of the NLC programme. So how have individuals, schools and the wider system benefited from engagement with network leadership? What has been the programme's impact on distributed leadership and on what is increasingly being referred to as *'system leadership'* (Fullan 2005)?

This has been the subject of systematic enquiry and research by the programme's own research team. Researchers have used interviews, performance data and structured, programme-wide enquiry to create a better understanding of the diversity and complexity of network relationships in various key dimensions of activity. In this article we present some of our findings on the experience of network leadership, illustrated by quotations (in italics) from the network heads, deputies and co-leaders who contributed to this research.

The NLC framework

To begin with each NLC was tasked to meet the following objectives:

- *to raise standards by improving the learning of pupils and staff, and by supporting school-to-school learning*
- *to develop leadership for learning by developing and harnessing the leadership potential of a wide range of people*

(Jackson 2004: 2)

On one level, this was an attempt to set school leaders free from the confines of single institutions and from institutionalised forms of thinking and practice. One of the few structural imperatives of the

programme was that every NLC should be jointly led by two or more co-leaders – not necessarily heads – from different institutions. In our interviews with network leaders we found the juxtaposition of co-leaders' and other leaders' perspectives helped to draw out the constant tension between shared network leadership and the traditional hierarchy of schools. We found this tension to be a consistent feature of school networks.

What changed?

The increased involvement of middle leaders and teachers in planning also had a direct impact both on classroom practice and on individuals' professional identity. Of course we know that the voluntary nature of our activity meant that we attracted leaders who were pre-disposed to ideas of collaboration; that does not diminish what they achieved.

Co-leaders and network steering groups began by using their formal authority to build shared vision and values in which power and authority could be redistributed and disparate constituent groups could be mobilised. Their work suggests that articulating the vision is at least as important as working towards it. The co-leadership model allowed network leaders to model collaborative vision-building and, in some cases, to divide tasks in order to exploit individual skills, for example one co-leader might concentrate on establishing vision and values, while another would focus on sharing, implementing and protecting them.

Early evidence from a number of network co-leaders confirmed that they were becoming *"much more outward-looking"* and adopting *"a wider perspective."* Co-leaders spoke of a shift towards *"more innovative practice"* and claimed that their vision had broadened: *"I think working across schools, having more distance, you can see things and put them in perspective a bit better."*

In terms of planning for innovation and change, schools benefited from their prolonged exposure to and engagement with other schools. This exposure helped them to identify and share effective practice. Our evidence suggests that this outward-facing movement increased as networks developed and that it was accompanied by greater involvement with the wider system.

The network's influence supplied a perspective which went beyond the single school and moved school planning closer to *"evolutionary and flexible"* models of effective school improvement (Louis & Miles quoted in Law & Glover 2000: 242). *"Our thinking has changed – our thinking is evolving. We are not set in our ways…I am proud of the fact that somebody my age is still prepared to come in and try something different every day."*

Networking involves a complex interplay between visible and invisible forms of leadership. In the most effective networks a strong sense of collective purpose and responsibility produced high expectations among staff in less formal positions.

CPD with impact

We found that headteachers spoke of increased confidence in themselves and in the professionalism of others. They understood the limitations of traditional CPD provision which often dies because it is not securely linked to the realities of school and classroom. They compared it to the increased resource that became available through the creation of new professional relationships.

"Well if ever I've got a problem now or I need a bit of support or an issue or a colleague needs a bit of CPD or we're stuck for something, my first thought is, Does it exist in the network? Can I find it there?"

A major advantage of this informal resource is that new ideas are not simply a matter for theoretical discussion. They can be viewed in operation in real classrooms in partner schools.

"You'd see use of specialist teachers from another [school]. You would try them out. You would see setting that worked and setting that didn't work in some of the other schools. And it would help you to make your decisions by practical examples that other schools were already doing."

Familiarisation with ideas of enquiry and collaborative leadership learning prompted much greater questioning among network leaders in general: *"I think we became much more analytical about leadership, and what constituted leadership."* Although their sense of professional identity remained located in their own schools, co-leaders were ready to acknowledge what they had learned from their experience of leading networks. This was often associated with a belief that network leadership is qualitatively distinct from school leadership. Those co-leaders who were appointed as headteachers at about the same time they became involved in networks appeared to be more prepared to see the two roles as of equal weight.

Network leadership frequently led to an irrevocable shift in schools' approach to professional development. The NLC brought to the surface the link between staff development and sustainability. Emphasis and impact were focused on influencing teaching staff and their practice, rather than on administration so that NLCs developed a culture of "*informed experimentation."* Network leaders did not translate the methods and practices they employed in running their own schools to running the network – indeed they could not do so – but took the lead in identifying and implementing innovative ideas.

In the classroom teachers have often seen the appeal to collective responsibility in terms of awareness-raising. This is true of both relatively inexperienced teachers and established deputies: *"It's definitely changed how I teach and I've been teaching a long time. I'm much more aware of how children learn in different ways and it wouldn't have happened if the network hadn't existed."* Other teachers spoke of having become more aware of what is going on in the classroom and of adopting a more enquiry-focused approach to children's learning.

It is paradoxical that networks encourage school leaders to be less isolated while also allowing schools to be increasingly self-sufficient in their provision of CPD.

Developing leadership

In a set of interviews with co-leaders conducted in December 2004 we asked how their involvement in a network had influenced leadership practice. Most of the interviewees said that the realities of leading networks and leading schools were reciprocally informative and complementary.

While network leaders emphasised how much they had learned they acknowledged the difficulties that can come from taking on a new, outward-looking role. There is always a danger that the seductiveness of new relationships might drain energy and effectiveness from leadership within their own schools. That is why they found it essential to distribute new leadership opportunities and responsibilities.

Potential problems were often offset by the increased confidence that came from successfully introducing initiatives aimed at improving pupil learning. Co-leaders detected a greater capacity for tolerance, for reflexivity and for learning to work collaboratively in addition to more traditional leadership skills. *"I look at the fact that no one person is right, I'm very interested in developing my*

own personal skills further. There isn't a full-stop in my career and neither is there a full stop in our staff's careers." Of course, these are not easy developments to measure.

Common references to the importance of developing *"relationships with other heads"* not only reflected the value of overcoming a pervasive sense of headteacher isolation but helped leaders when they moved into new roles, for example as advisors, where they were able to transport what they had learned about working collaboratively into the wider system.

Middle leaders too benefited enormously from the new leadership roles that networks created. They spoke of improving their questioning techniques and changing their approaches to teaching in general, as well as learning from increased engagement with research:

"The very fact that you're involved with other people in the network means… [you] keep the momentum going, in terms of research you can't allow the inertia to build up because you've made a commitment to it… we do see that as one of the things that brings life to schools and to teachers, and really, renews the vigour of lessons and gets kids on side."

Collaboration breeds further collaboration.

Expanding the boundaries

Successful networks create the kind of enthusiasm that is associated with a loosening of boundaries and restrictions and with wholesale shifts in philosophy rather than with adjustments to management models. Network leaders frequently told us that NLCs offered a new and effective way of working that they wanted to continue in some unspecified form. One head who had also been a co-leader made a very clear distinction, and connection, between these two leadership roles:

"Co-leader of the Network, as it began, I think was trying to develop an idea and an ideal. Head teacher in the school was to try to use that ideal to manage personnel, to manage pupils, to manage parents, to manage governors' policy making."

This head's school was already quite advanced in terms of distributing leadership and involving staff at all levels in decision-making. Involvement in networks allowed this kind of management practice to be shared.

For many, reverting to an earlier style of management or leadership was no longer possible because everyone involved had learned and developed so much: *"I'm sure that working with [my two co-leaders] has had an impact on the way I work with my assistant head because I've got used to sharing that little bit more."* Creating time and space to develop lateral leadership capacity at all levels inevitably had an impact on how schools were managed and on the development of non-teaching staff:

Network membership brings powerful new influences to bear on leaders. There is a strong legitimising effect in having elements of your management ethos recognised by a broader community of schools. Simultaneously, the weakening of institutional boundaries renders schools more susceptible to the multiple external influences that are often associated with increased momentum.

Strengthening communities

Involvement in networks draws schools and school leaders into a range of communities and community relationships. Opportunities for schools to collaborate with schools and other partners have proliferated since the NLC programme was established; many schools are now involved in multiple networks. This

creates particularly fertile ground for the acquisition and transmission of knowledge about building community partnerships and involving local stakeholders. However, proliferating network connections can bring greater complexity. Local authorities attempting to broker networks in response to *Every Child Matters* have experienced the same difficulties (Mongon & Farrar 2006).

Building community among headteachers is a feature of NLCs that perhaps reflects that group's desire to overcome feelings of isolation. Lingering elements of competitiveness that characterised relationships in initiatives such as Education Action Zones were vanquished. *"It's certainly changed how I look at staff in schools and how I access the benefits from other schools."* Another co-leader saw the network taking over some of the functions traditionally found externally: *"In a sense you're creating a local authority within the group of schools within the partnership."* This network had a particular emphasis on developing *"home grown, tailor made"* training and leadership opportunities.

Some co-leaders have spoken of their new relationships with fellow heads becoming closer and more open than anything they had experienced in previous cluster arrangements.

Beyond NLCs

NLCs have been successful in providing leadership opportunities that are not so widely available in individual schools, often as a consequence of engagement in network-wide enquiry.

The co-leadership model has proved durable and effective and many co-leaders have chosen to replicate it as they move into new roles and partnerships. This durability seems to have been reinforced, rather than undermined, by the fact that co-leaders had to learn in situ and were therefore compelled to model collaborative leadership learning. As co-leaders move on the increased leadership capacity they created tends to be filled by others. This is a development that may have important implications for succession planning.

Now, as these leaders are dispersed into the wider system there is emergent evidence that they are becoming increasingly influential. Their perceptions of their new, expanded roles echo Fullan's proposition that *"Networks get you out of your own narrow world. And when you enlarge your world laterally within your own level of the system, and vertically across levels, you gain ideas and perspective"* (Fullan 2006: 4).

There is no simple, single solution to leading networks but some leaders found that the enlarged perspective they gained from their first experience of network leadership made them particularly well-placed to respond to the introduction of Primary National Strategy Learning Networks and the *Every Child Matters* agenda.

Note

This article is an edited excerpt from a research paper by Michael Jopling and David Crandall. More information about this work can be found at http://networkedlearning.ncsl.org.uk. NCSL publications listed below can be found at http://ncsl.org.uk.

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