

The Role of Networks in Supporting School Improvement¹

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Abstract

The international evidence is clear that autonomous schools who are free to work collaboratively together can spur innovation and sustain the drive to innovate, as well as enhancing student achievement. However, when educational policies, as in England, focus on autonomy, hierarchies and marketisation then both excellence and equity at the system level are compromised. The forms of networking and collaboration described in this chapter that focus on learning at a range of levels, provide a means of facilitating school improvement as well as contributing to large-scale reform. They also offer the potential for ‘re-inventing’ the ‘middle tier’ in terms of school governance, by promoting the focus on learning, linkages, and multi-functional partnerships.

Key Words

Autonomy, Networks, Professional Development, School Improvement, System Reform, Teaching and Learning.

Introduction

In reflecting on - What's next for Professional Learning Networks? – it is important to remember that the construct has a distinguished provenance in education. Over the years there has been much international interest in the role of networks in supporting school improvement (Wohlstetter et al 2003). But unfortunately, there are also various misconceptions of the network concept, particularly in terms of how policy can affect practice. Although networks bring together those with like-minded interests, they are more than just opportunities to share ‘good practice’. The following definition of networks emerged from my early analysis of effective networks for the OECD (Hopkins 2003):

Networks are purposeful social entities characterised by a commitment to quality, rigour, and a focus on outcomes. They are also an effective means of supporting innovation in times of change. In education, networks promote the dissemination of good practice, enhance the professional development of teachers, support capacity building in schools, mediate between centralised and decentralised structures, and

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assist in the process of re-structuring and re-culturing educational organisations and systems.

In looking to the future of networks in professional learning and school improvement, this definition still holds much validity. Its implications will be discussed in more detail as the chapter progresses. In doing so and in developing the argument of the chapter, we will:

- Review the international evidence on successful systemic educational reform in terms of policies for autonomy and networking.
- Situate the discussion of Networks in their contemporary context in England.
- Present three cameos of successful networking initiatives
- Propose criteria for effective networking for school improvement.

The Global Evidence on Autonomy and Networking

The educational policy direction in many developed countries has changed quite dramatically in the recent past. There has been a rapid shift away from the government managed educational changes of the 1990s and 2000s to far more decentralized systems based on the principle of “autonomy”. This is not to say that reforms and strategies of that period have not worked, indeed in retrospect they have been extremely successful in raising standards and decreasing the variation of performance in the system. But as became apparent in England there is a limit to the impact that can be achieved by top-down reforms and another way has to be sought (Hopkins 2007).

In many jurisdictions this other way is called “autonomy” and is often driven by reasons and forces other than those educational. The most influential driver recently was the meltdown in global economic systems since 2008 which was coupled with an ideological desire from many governments for the “small state”. These irresistible forces were at times also coupled with a genuine belief that there is a need to unleash the power of the profession that has previously been harnessed by too much control. There are some arguments to support such a policy direction, but there are also some caveats to be entered too. It is foolish to think that by simply adopting a policy of autonomy that dismantles existing system structures and gives unfettered freedoms to schools will work by itself.

Andreas Schleicher (2018:114) in his authoritative text on *World Class* school systems, in comments on the findings of recent OECD research:

But all (these systems) flourished because governance and oversight arrangements gave them the freedom to create spaces for experimentation.

A (recent OECD) study also underscored the risk of autonomy leading to the ‘atomisation’ of schools. Working with others can spur innovation and sustain the drive to innovate. However, school autonomy will be self-defeating if it is interpreted as functioning in isolation. Instead, autonomy should take the form of freedom and flexibility to work with many partners.

Schleicher (2018:117) further adds:

But more than that might be needed. PISA data show that in school systems where knowledge is shared among teachers, autonomy is a positive advantage; but in school systems without a culture of peer learning and accountability, autonomy might actually adversely affect student performance. There needs to be enough

knowledge mobilisation and sharing and checks and balances to make sure Academies are using their independence effectively – and wisely.

It is evidence like this that led me to develop a framework for ‘Networked Autonomy’ (Hopkins 2013). Autonomous networked schools:

- Put in place substantive collaborative arrangements
- Understand they are as strong as the weakest link. Schools that are failing and/or underperforming can expect to receive unconditional support from all network schools, as well as from commissioned external agencies
- Support and accept significantly enhanced funding for students most at risk
- Operate within a rationalized system of national and local agency functions and roles that allow a higher degree of co-ordination for this increasingly devolved system.

Such a set of principles allow schools to use “Networked Autonomy” to:

- More fully express their moral purpose of enabling every student to reach their potential
- Ensure that every teacher has the maximum time to teach and to develop their professional competence
- Maximise resource allocation to ensure that this happens
- Explore the full potential of the ‘inside – out’ school development strategy
- Enable leadership to work more effectively with the system both within and outside the school and generate sustainable networks that deepen the impact on student learning
- Move from external to professional forms of accountability.

The Contemporary Context in England

The discussion in the previous section focussed on what we know about effective networking and the apparent tension with policies that emphasise autonomy. In reflecting on the policy situation in England and informed by the PISA data, Schleicher (2018:116) is sceptical about how ‘granting greater school autonomy (would) actually lead to better school performance’. He continues:

The academies show how important it is to combine professional autonomy with a collaborative culture, both among teachers and among schools. The challenge for an academy-style system is to find a way to share knowledge among schools. Knowledge in the field of education is very sticky; it does not spread easily.

In their extensive and well-grounded research *Hierarchy, Markets and Networks*, Toby Greany and Rob Higham (2018) analyse the ‘self-improving school-led system’ agenda in England and examine the implications for schools. They describe their research as follows (Greany and Higham 2018:10):

This report analyses how schools in England have interpreted and begun to respond to the government’s ‘self-improving school-led system’ (SISS) policy agenda. While largely undefined in official texts, the SISS agenda has become an overarching narrative for schools’ policy since 2010, encompassing an ensemble of reforms on academies, the promotion of multi-academy trusts (MATs), the roll back of local

authorities (LAs) from school oversight, and the development of new school-to-school support models, such as Teaching School Alliances (TSAs).

The SISS concept was originally and elegantly outlined by David Hargreaves (2010, 2011, 2012) in three highly influential monographs. In commenting on the new model of national teaching schools in England, as part of his vision his vision of the Self-improving School System, Hargreaves (2011, p. 5) says:

The new teaching schools, based on the concept of the teaching hospital, are to be a critical element in a more self-improving school system. They will:

- Train new entrants to the profession with other partners, including universities
- Lead peer-to-peer learning and professional development, including the designation and deployment of the new specialist leaders of education (SLEs)
- Identify and nurture leadership potential
- Lead an alliance of other schools and partners to improve the quality of teaching and learning
- Form a national network to support the schools in innovation and knowledge transfer
- Be at the heart of a different strategy of school improvement that puts responsibility on the profession and schools.

To Hargreaves the SISS was designed to be genuinely transformative, empower schools and lead to enhanced equity in student performance. In this respect his proposals echoed Schleicher's analysis referred to above. The irony is that the Department for Education also claimed that their policies introduced using the SISS rhetoric would also lead to a lessening of centralised control and enhanced autonomy.

The reality is that it has done nothing of the sort as these following quotations from Greany and Higham's (2018: pp12-16) book demonstrate:

- With academization, powers of school oversight are moving from local to national government. This process has been uneven and often fraught. ... The picture that emerges is of chaotic centralization, characterized by competing claims to authority and legitimacy but diminishing local knowledge about schools. (page 12)
- That new local and regional markets in improvement services are particularly incentivizing a focus on the types of knowledge and expertise that can most easily be codified and commoditized (as 'best practices') rather than on the joint-practice development and learning processes advocated by Hargreaves (2012) as essential for a SISS. (page 14)
- MATs are commonly referred to as a form of partnership, but we argue that this is inappropriate given a common definition of partnerships as 'legally autonomous organizations that work together'. ... We argue MATs are best understood in terms of 'mergers and acquisitions', with prescribed models of governance and leadership largely derived from the private and, to a lesser extent, voluntary sectors. (page 15)
- MATs have been encouraged to grow or merge by the DfE, in search of efficiencies and 'economies of scale'. However, our statistical analysis of MAT impact on pupil attainment and progress shows there is no positive impact from MAT status for pupils in either primary or secondary academies when compared to pupils in similar standalone academies. (page 15)

- We conclude that rather than ‘moving control to the frontline’, the SISS agenda has intensified hierarchical governance and the state’s powers of intervention, further constraining the professionalism of school staff and steering the system through a model we term ‘coercive autonomy’. (page 16)
- Our findings are unambiguous in illustrating the importance of Ofsted and the wider accountability framework in influencing the behaviour of schools, suggesting that hierarchical governance is more influential than market or network co-ordination in England. (page 16)

These quotes do not do justice to the richness and complexity of Greany and Higham’s research and analysis, but they do give a clear understanding of their key conclusions. Their findings are also in line with the conclusions of Schleicher and aspirations of Hargreaves.

So let us try to summarise the argument so far about the role of networking in supporting school improvement. To this point two conclusions can be drawn:

- **The evidence from PISA is that forms of collaboration and knowledge transfer are a critical factor in raising standards of student performance in the most successful educational systems.**

Yet –

- **The policy framework in England with the emphasis both on establishing hierarchies and developing the market militate against this.**

The chapter concludes by suggesting policy advice and strategies for realigning policy in England that would enable our schools, leaders, and students to emulate the standards and practices of the high performing PISA systems. Before we do this however, let us look at three practices that have been developed in England that have a proven track record of maximising the gains that can be made when utilising network practices authentically.

Networking Cameos

If we are to achieve the form of collaboration alluded to in Schleicher’s analysis of the PISA data that is consistent with high levels of systemic student achievement, we need to be far more precise about the practices involved. Schleicher set the scene and my definition of Networked Autonomy gave the construct more shape. This however, despite Government rhetoric, is not the contemporary practice in England where on current performance student achievement still stagnates (Perry and Hopkins 2017). Before proposing further policy recommendations let us look briefly at three cameos of collaborative practice that fit with our definition of Networked Autonomy.

Networking and Innovation - In his monograph *The Education Epidemic* David Hargreaves (2003) not only described the various forms of capital as they applied to schools, but also outlines an agenda for educational transformation based on innovation and networking. The essential task, Hargreaves argues, is to create a climate in which it is possible for teachers to actively engage in innovation and to transfer validated innovations rapidly within their school and into other schools. This does not mean a return to “letting a thousand flowers bloom” but a disciplined approach to innovation.

If leading-edge schools – by definition a minority – take the lead in knowledge creation he asks, what happens to innovation in the rest of the system? Hargreaves responds that transformation is achieved in two ways:

- By moving the best schools (or departments / key stages within them) further ahead. That is, through front-line innovation conducted by leading-edge institutions which develop new ideas into original practices;
And
- By closing the gap between the least and most effective schools (or subject departments) – transferred innovation.

Transformation thus combines ‘moving ahead’ with ‘levelling up’. To achieve such a ‘lateral strategy’ for transferred innovation requires the following strategic components:

- It must become clear what is meant by ‘good’ and ‘best’ practice among teachers;
- There needs to be a method of locating good practice and sound innovations;
- Innovations must be ones that bring real advantages to teachers; and
- Methods of transferring innovation effectively have to be devised.

Schools that have adopted such an approach to collaboration are enthusiastic about the benefits such an approach generates. They agree with David Hargreaves that networks are the foundations for an innovative system of education.

Networked Learning Communities -The Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme in England was a large-scale development and enquiry initiative involving 137 networks (1,500 schools) between 2002 and 2006. It was a programme of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) and was specifically designed to provide policy and system learning (as well as practical evidence) about network design and implementation. Their work also focussed on network size and type, facilitation and leadership, formation processes and growth states, brokerage, system support and incentivisation. It was charged with generating evidence about how and under what conditions networks can make a contribution to raising student achievement, about the leadership practices that prove to hold most potential for school-to-school learning and about the new relationships emerging between networks as a unit of engagement and their Local Authority or MAT partners (Jackson and Temperley 2006).

The crucial point about the NLC programme is in the name. Their purpose was explicitly about ‘learning’ and by that token student achievement, and networked learning between schools rather than professional learning communities in schools, hence their potential systemic impact. There were six strands to the basic framework of the networked learning communities design (NLC nd):

- Pupil learning – a pedagogic focus
- Adult learning – professional learning communities a key aspiration
- Leadership learning – at all levels
- Organisational learning – new organisational learning norms
- School-to-school learning – networked learning
- Network-to-network learning – lateral system learning.

Each network additionally elected to have at least one external partner, usually a Higher Education Institution or Local Authority / MAT – or both. Finally, there were also four non-negotiable principles (NLC nd):

- Moral purpose – a commitment to success for all children ('raising the bar and closing the gap' is a social justice representation of the same theme)
- Shared leadership (for example, co-leadership)
- Enquiry-based practice (evidence and data-driven learning)
- Adherence to a model of learning.

In summary, successful networked learning activity in NLCs had the following characteristics (Jackson and Temperley 2006). It was:

- Focused upon shared learning objectives, locally owned by groups of schools
- Exhibited the characteristics of the learning design outlined above
- Comprised participants drawn from different schools, learning on behalf of colleagues within their own and other schools in the network or
- Comprised of participants within the same schools, learning on behalf of colleagues within their own and other schools in the network
- Designed to enable individuals to learn from, with and on behalf of others
- Purposefully designed and facilitated to change professional knowledge and practice in order to improve student learning
- Housed within its design opportunities for leadership learning
- Potentially transformative – for participants and for students – owing to its orientation towards changes in practice.

Although the focus of the NLC programme tended to be more on process than outcome, there is reliable assessment data to support its positive influence on student achievement (cited in Jackson and Temperley 2006). For example:

- Key Stage 4 data for 2005 shows that NLC schools had risen more than non-NLC schools the percentage of pupils achieving five or more A* to C grades between 2004 and 2005. In terms of average point scores across all grades, the results again show that NLC schools had risen more than non-NLC schools.
- When comparing Key Stage 4 for 2005 with the results from 2003, it can again be seen that NLC schools had risen more than non-NLC schools in the percentage of pupils achieving five or more A* to C grades.

In concluding their ICSEI paper, Jackson and Temperley (2006), claim with some justification that by *aligning* networked learning processes for adults and pupils, and having leadership that promotes and supports that learning, there is evidence that networks succeed in their twin objectives of fostering learning communities and raising pupil achievement.

Networking in Multi-Academy Trusts (MAT) – In my 'Unleashing Greatness' paper (Hopkins 2020) I argue that if a school's improvement journey is to be sustained over the long term, the developments have to be integrated into the very fabric of the system pedagogy. McKinsey (Mourshead, Chijioke & Barber, 2010) identified three ways that improving systems do this by:

- Establishing collaborative practices
- Developing a mediating layer between the schools and the centre; and

- Architecting tomorrow's leadership.

The key point here, that also relates to Schleicher's PISA analysis, is the need for some 'mediating level' within the system to connect the centre to schools and schools to each other. The most effective Networks have assumed this role and have developed productive ways of learning from their best, for collaborating purposefully and for the sharing of outstanding practice.

In England currently, the most common middle tier organisation MATs (Hopkins, 2016). In outstanding MATs, capacity is built at the local level to ensure that all those in a Trust's family of schools progress as rapidly as possible towards excellence. **Figure 1** illustrates how this works:

- Central to local capacity building is the Regional Director or Executive Principal who provides leadership, develops the narrative and acts as the Trust's champion in that geographic area.
- One of their key tasks is to build local capacity by training a group of lead practitioners in a MAT's ways of working, materials and strategies.
- The training design used to develop trainers is Bruce Joyce's and Showers peer coaching model (Joyce and Showers 1995, Joyce and Calhoun 2010).
- These trainers then work with the school improvement teams in each school to build within-school capacity and consistency.
- Inter-school networking allows for authentic innovation and the transfer of outstanding practice, thus building the capacity of the network as a whole.

Insert Figure 1 about here

In my experience, the three key components of this strategy – school improvement teams, staff development processes and networking – should provide the focus for much of the training for executive principals or equivalent within the MAT, as they play their critical role in systemic improvement. In moving to scale, it is clear from international bench marking studies of school performance that (Hopkins, 2013):

- Decentralisation by itself increases variation and reduces overall system performance. There is a consequent need for some 'mediating level' within the system to connect the centre to schools and schools to each other – Networks and MATs can provide this function.
- Leadership is the crucial factor both in school transformation and system renewal, so investment particularly in Head / Principal and leadership training is essential – hence the use of frameworks such as the 'Unleashing Greatness' school improvement strategy to guide action.
- The quality of teaching is the best determinant of student performance, so that any reform framework must address the professional repertoires of teachers and other adults in the classroom – thus the focus in high performing Trusts and Networks on the progress of learners and the development of teachers.
- Outstanding educational systems find ways of learning from its best and strategically uses the diversity within the system to good advantage – this is why capacity needs to be built not only within Trusts and Networks, but also between them at the system level.

Moving Forward

To summarise, Networks have the potential to support educational innovation and change and enhance student learning by:

- Keeping the focus on the core purposes of schooling in particular the focus on student learning
- Enhancing the skill of teachers, leaders and other educators in change agent skills, managing the change process and creating and sustaining a discourse on teaching and learning
- Providing a focal point for the dissemination of good practice, the generalisability of innovation and the creation of 'action oriented' knowledge about effective educational practices
- Building capacity for continuous improvement at a local level, and in particular in creating professional learning networks, within and between schools
- Ensuring that systems of pressure and support are integrated not segmented. For example, professional learning networks incorporate pressure and support in a seamless way
- Acting as a link between the centralised and decentralised schism resulting from many contemporary policy initiatives; in particular in contributing to policy coherence horizontally and vertically.

The analysis of the conditions required for effective networking, and the contribution of networks to innovation and change, demonstrate that networks can operate at a number of different levels. In the context of supporting innovation one can discern an evolving typology of Network types. At the basic level networks facilitate the sharing of good practice, at the highest level they can act as agents of system renewal.

1. At its most basic level a network could be regarded as simply groups of teachers joining together for a common curriculum purpose and for the sharing of good practice.
2. At a more ambitious level networks could involve groups of teachers and schools joining together for the purposes of school improvement with the explicit aim of not just sharing practice but of enhancing teaching and learning throughout a school or groups of schools.
3. Over and above this, networks could also not just serve the purpose of knowledge transfer and school improvement, but also involve groups of stakeholders joining together for the implementation of specific policies locally and possibly nationally.
4. A further extension of this way of working is found when groups of networks (within and outside education) link together for system improvement in terms of social justice and inclusion.
5. Finally, there is the possibility of groups of networks working together not just on a social justice agenda, but also to act explicitly as an agency for system renewal and transformation.

In looking to the future of networking, based on the evidence and argument of this chapter, one can confidently make two final points:

1. First, Governments and policy makers should embrace networks not only as a strategy to assist in the implementation of a reform agenda, but also as the key

means of achieving school improvement. Without some form of networking, it is highly unlikely that the aspirations for governmental programmes of educational reform, particularly in decentralised systems, will be realised.

2. Second, if one issue is certain it is that the future of schooling requires a systemic perspective, which implies a high degree of consistency across the policy spectrum and an unrelenting focus on student achievement and learning. Networks, as a natural infrastructure for both innovation and the informing of government policy, provide a means for doing just that.

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Figure 1

