

Too many cooks...

Is collaboration for school improvement all it's cracked up to be? **James Croft**, head of the Centre for Market Reform of Education investigates

Collaboration between schools has come to be regarded as an important way in which they may find the means to improve their educational performance. As schools systems in England and elsewhere have become more autonomous, partnerships between schools, of both formal and informal nature, and for a range of purposes, have proliferated across the

landscape, and are regarded as having been key to the development of a self-improving school system. Inter-school collaboration is clearly a multi-faceted phenomenon, yet it is striking how much collaborative effort is expended on partnerships that have little directly to do with improving pupil attainment.

In a recent review of the research literature on the subject, published by the Centre for the Study of Market Reform of Education (CMRE), I show why. At the

theoretical level, ideology obscures from view the primary purpose of schools. There is a clear bias towards underscoring the importance of collaboration between schools for staff development and support, professional collegiality, and for the maintenance of a particular conception of public service: the agenda, in other words, is basically 'producer captured'.

The links between teacher empowerment, improved organisational functioning, linked in turn to pupil outcomes, are

assumed as self-evident, and unsurprisingly (given the overwhelmingly qualitative nature of the research), researchers tend to find what they are looking for. Studies typically draw on interviews and survey data gathered from 'successful collaborations', which are addressed to showing teachers' perceptions of improved efficacy, more positive attitudes toward teaching, and higher levels of professional trust. But what of schools that work to foster these things and don't succeed in terms of the education bottom line? Looking at successful schools alone cannot tell us what makes the difference.

So, as was recognised in the House of Commons Education Committee's 2013 report on the subject, school-to-school partnerships and networks have to date been promoted by theoreticians and (historically) by policymakers far in advance of any real understanding of the value they add. In the only meta-review attempted, the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE) could find only a handful of studies (out of over four and a half thousand papers undertaken between 1995 and 2005) that even attempted to address impact on learning. These suggested specific niche applications (such as to special educational needs); studies of networks with broader aims could not even show an association with higher impact that might suggest further effort to establish causal relationships in this area might be warranted. All suffer from significant methodological weaknesses.

Underlying causal relationships

Recent updates, notably from Daniel Muijs of the Centre for Educational Effectiveness, Improvement and Policy, at the University of Southampton, have found that the evidence base has not improved since. The Education Endowment Foundation has recognised this issue and has sought to commission projects accordingly, but the approach taken is ultimately inadequate for identifying underlying causal relationships. (Both utilise so-called 'matching methods' to compare test-score outcomes of schools engaged in collaborative ventures with otherwise similar schools. Unlike properly randomised trials, such methods cannot take 'unseen' variables, such as the motivation and quality of leadership, into the equation.)

To be fair, there's a limited amount you can do to get at underlying causal relationships, and thus assess policy impact, after the fact. So going forward it's important that the EEF stick to its brief and only commission research to be undertaken in an experimental or quasi-experimental research environment. Only then will researchers be in a position to even begin sorting out the relative influences of multiple simultaneous initiatives (a big problem with the EEF-commissioned studies), and overlaying collaborative structures.

Such robust quantitative research is necessary because, as Tim Oates of Cambridge Assessment (chair of the government's recent review of the National Curriculum), puts it in the foreword to my report, at present collaboration and networking are regarded as good things in and of themselves, irrespective of the educational benefit of the practices disseminated. Influential theories of collaboration and networking – be they oriented to countering the emphasis on testing that has been characteristic of moves towards encouraging greater competition between schools; ongoing contextual discovery of new knowledge about the teaching and learning process; or (indefinite) support for underperforming teachers – eclipse educational institutions' primary purpose – enabling pupils to master and deploy the required subject knowledge and skills. Cutting through the confusion requires a keen and uncompromising focus on pupil achievement.

So if there's no evidence for positive effects for pupils from school collaboration, is there research to suggest that other ways they might be working together – in federations or chains for example – might be more impactful? Strangely, though joining a school group entails learning a very different way of working together, federation is often seen as a form of collaboration. But it's not: 'hard federation', as when a school joins a multi-academy trust, involves corporate structural merger and a much higher degree of integration.

Clearly defined operating models

Recent quantitative research in this area led by Muijs and Chris Chapman of the University of Glasgow, though unable to draw causal inferences, shows promise. ▶



► Their research shows that those types of federation most expressly purposed to improving pupil attainment, and which have organised themselves to deliver, are likely to be most impactful. Collaborations, by contrast, which seek to preserve partner schools' independence, such that they continue to be 'headed, inspected, league-tabled and funded' separately, are less likely to spur improvements in pupil attainment. Successive national audits and committee inquiries have also found them less likely to be subject to rigorous cost-benefit analysis. They're prone to a lack of clarity around objectives, what resources are likely to be required to achieve them, and to problems with oversight and accountability.

It's likely that this problem can only be ameliorated consistently in the chain, and more specifically, hard-federation context, as was argued in a recent paper produced by Matthew Robb and Anna Grotberg of Parthenon-EY for the think tank Reform. Rationalisation of governance, leadership and management responsibilities across several schools, frees resources for adding corporate-level expertise and capacity, among other things for performance management and quality control. Clearly defined operating models with teaching approaches and labour models organised around a clear, outcomes-focused educational vision, are consistently cited

in the research literature as those facets of school autonomy that matter most for educational improvement.

This probably doesn't come as any surprise to those with experience of other sectors, yet the pervasive influence of theory that inclines schools to resist systemisation and scale in favour of local and less formal arrangements is such that school leaders tend to go through an unnecessarily protracted process of trial and error of different collaborative links and networks before they are persuaded of the case for formal federation and all that follows.

Careful alignment

So what to do? In my view the evidence base is nowhere near clear cut enough to support government intervention to drive such consolidation on a single model (if it ever is). This approach would inevitably stifle competing propositions in the process. Devolutionary school reform has already supplied many of the conditions necessary for more outcomes-focused provision; what is needed is more careful alignment of other features of the system to support this focus. I sketch the broad approach that should be taken in my report; Robb and Grotberg flesh out some proposals worthy of fuller consideration that are consistent with it.

I do think there's a case to be made for incentivising schools to join chains further by developing data-led inspection at the group level. This should look at how consistently operating models have been applied, and resources allocated and managed, across schools. Presently, schools have to compete head to head for development capital from the DfE. This should be given over to the stewardship of chains as a starting place and constraints eased on how it may be allocated. For schools, this would bring capital resources within reach. The Education Funding Agency is a bureaucratic nightmare and the sooner government is able to devolve some of its responsibilities the better.

Under such conditions, though some collaborations might be expected to develop organically in the market, the case for joining a well-managed and supported school group would be more compelling. Greater take-up would surely bring greater sustainability to England's school system. ■

James Croft is executive director of the Centre for the Study of Market Reform of Education and author of 'Collaborative overreach: why collaboration probably isn't key to the next phase of school reform'.

A breath of fresh air

Outdoor education deserves more of our attention, argues **Chris Davies** of the Outward Bound Trust

Next year, the Outward Bound Trust celebrates its 75th year of nurturing talent in young people through experiential outdoor learning. Our courses are as relevant now as they were back in 1941, but the world is a different place and young peoples' development needs are more complex than ever before.

We have a responsibility to reach out and help as many young people as we can, irrespective of their financial or social position. Annually, the trust fund-raises over £5 million to make our courses accessible to more than 25,000 young people through our financial assistance and scholarship schemes.

From our transition courses which help ease primary school children onto their next step in education through to development courses for graduates and apprentices, each course is designed to deliver meaningful, lasting outcomes.

One highly successful initiative is The Outward Bound Skills for Life Award (SfLA), which enables young people aged 15 to 19 to develop essential skills and behaviours as they prepare for life beyond school. Managing change at a critical moment in a young person's life is one of the most challenging aspects of growing up. We are striving to develop strategic corporate partnerships with businesses and like-minded 'youth' organisations to help fund and also find participants, so the award has a wide reaching impact on a larger number of young people.

We already work with thousands of graduates and apprentices from large organisations to develop essential behaviours for their successful career progression. SfLA represents a real opportunity for young people before they enter the workplace to gain a competitive advantage over their peers, who might be equally as qualified, by developing



sought after qualities demanded by modern businesses such as grit, resilience, self-management and communication skills. Through our own evaluation, as well as our connections with employers and university admission tutors, we're increasingly aware of a lack of employability skills in young people, which is why we created the SfLA to help bridge this gap.

The course has been designed to be highly challenging for participants to ensure learning is quickly and powerfully embedded. Lasting 19 days it is an immersive experience involving challenging journeys on land and water, including a crucial reflective element focusing on developing life-long personal skills as keys to success. Participants leave with an award, a CV that stands out, a clear action plan and a new sense of self-belief enabling them to take on life.

Our courses receive overwhelmingly positive feedback, not only from participants but from parents, teachers and employers – who have consistently identified a range of skills, developed during the courses that deliver a positive and long-lasting impact.

We are already partnered by a number of like-minded organisations such as the Royal

National Children's Foundation which exists to provide life-changing opportunities when it is needed most, and cadet groups, who are developing well-rounded future leaders.

As well as working with partners to find young people for us, corporate supporters able to fund programmes are equally important for future growth. We are fully aware that not all potential participants are in a position to fund themselves. Funding last year from Akzo Nobel helped us give 60 young highly committed people a scholarship to participate and complete a Skills for Life Award.

We want to develop the kind of alliances that benefit not only individual young people but employers and communities. Sponsoring SfLA will help manage the 'skills gap', thereby benefiting society as a whole. ■

If you'd like to learn more about The Skills for Life Award, our aims and how we work in partnership, please contact Chris Davies, head of individuals business development at the Outward Bound Trust, on 01931 740 000.