Effective partnership models

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The terms collaboration and partnership are frequently bandied around and presented as solutions to school improvement but are often ill-defined and poorly understood.

This literature review, the first in a series of literature reviews on topical issues, examines effective partnership working. It draws on existing academic research, evaluations and case studies to explore the following questions: what is partnership? What are the cross-cutting features of effective partnership? What good practice is there?

The review identifies three key lessons for those working in partnership:

1. Adopt a shared goal and a shared sense of purpose
2. Respect what already works well, whilst being open to contrasting practice
3. Build clear lines of communication and high levels of trust

Introduction

There are a range of levels of and approaches to partnership and significant variation in the typologies presented in the literature - some separating out networks and participation (Stern and Green 2005), some referring to overlapping terms such as collaboration, cooperation, coordination, coalition, network, alliance and partnership (Huxham and Vangen 2000) and others drawing a distinction between formal networks, informal and organic collaborations, and specific-focus partnerships (Walker et al. 2013). As Cardini argues, ‘practically speaking, partnerships differ enormously from one another in terms of the number, sector and type of partners involved, their scale and their objectives’ (2006: 393) and the term ‘partnership’ has come to capture an increasing range of the activities in which schools are involved (2006: 397).

For the purposes of this summary we touch on three levels of partnership working:

- Brokering: A partner helps a school access sources of support
- Providing support: A partner provides support
- Networks: A network of partners mutually support each other
What is partnership?
Stern and Green define a partnership as ‘a programme that has a high level of commitment, mutual trust, equal ownership and the achievement of a common goal’ (2005: 270). Bennett and Anderson (2002) suggest that partnerships include the following elements: collaboration; mutual accountability; voluntary entry; and an assumption of equality, although McQuaid (2000) contends that partnership might not necessarily involve equal power relationships, for instance if one partner has access to resources or expertise that give it a legitimate claim to dictate the direction of a project. Harman (2000) notes that partnership working can involve a spectrum of institutional arrangements, from an agreement to cooperate through to a fully-fledged institutional merger.

In their evaluation of creative arts partnerships in the UK, Docherty and Harland (2001) observe that while some partnerships might consist of a series of ad-hoc relationships in which partners unite around single one-off projects, other partnerships are based on a more sustained, strategic relationship.

The wider literature on partnerships demonstrates that in the context of the school system, ‘partnership working’ might involve any of the following types of partnerships:
- Partnerships between schools, such as federations and Excellence in Cities
- Inter-agency partnerships between schools and other public bodies (which were increasingly common following the introduction of Every Child Matters)
- Partnerships between schools and non-state organisations, such as businesses and charities

The National Audit Office (2009: 5) provides the following analysis of partnership:
School partnerships are frequently driven by ‘problems’ (National Audit Office 2009: 6) with schools often citing lack of problems as the reason for not partnering and many partnerships being directed towards improving behaviour or attainment. Budget constraints following the next general election may therefore act as a driver of partnership working in the future (Freedman 2015).

For a working setup to qualify as ‘partnership working’, the literature suggests it must be:

- Strategic (driven by a shared goal which underpins the desire to work together)
- Sustained (involves working together over the longer term, either via a series of short projects or one continuous project)

While ‘partnership-as-networking’ is a highly collaborative approach in which all partners provide inputs, partnership-as-brokering and partnership-as-provision are likely to be less collaborative, with more of a client-provider character.

**What are the cross-cutting features of effective partnership?**
It may sound obvious, but the most common theme is the need for a shared goal. Lima (2010) highlights the key features of effective networks and these provide useful guidance for effective partnership:

- Goal directedness
- Clear and specific goals
- Structuring relationships around those goals
- A central planning and coordinating function.

Meanwhile Glatter argues that ‘aspects of successful partnerships include: clarity of objectives; agreement on modes of operation; clear lines of communication and decision making; clear exit routes; suitable incentives within and between organisations; support among the partners’ institutions and, most importantly, trust between the partners’ (2003: 19).

Based on intensive study of a variety of partnerships in action, Huxham and Vangen (2000) make the case for a ‘small wins’ approach, whereby modest, achievable outcomes are secured first, before embarking on more ambitious projects which require greater trust between partners.

Sharp et al. (2006: 14) summarise the key elements of effective partnerships as:

- Entering into partnerships on a voluntary basis, with a common understanding of mutual benefit
- Establishing a shared vision and mutual trust
- Sharing resources, benefits, responsibility and risks, with a reasonable (relatively equal) balance of power
- The capacity of each partner to commit to joint working, with each partner bringing different, complementary types of expertise
- Endorsement from government and organisational leaders
- Joint planning with sufficient flexibility
- Consistent and effective communication
● Good systems for administrative support
● Monitoring progress (reassess, revise and recommit)

The NAO evaluation of school partnerships (National Audit Office 2009) identified the following key features of effective school partnerships:

● Trust
● Goodwill and commitment among members
● Clear and consensual objectives
● Good alignment with local context
● Inclusive of all those who have the skills and knowledge to usefully contribute, whatever their role
● Local authority support and, where there is a clear role to play, direct involvement
● Recognition that all partner schools have something to contribute, and willingness to share success
● Regular evaluation with independent input
● Simple governance with periodic review to assess whether the partnership is meeting its full potential and should continue

Meanwhile, in a review of the existing literature as part of an evaluation of the Myscience partnership with schools, Walker et al. (2013) identify three main factors behind successful partnerships:

● A shared sense of purpose
● The existence of a trusting environment in which partners can share successes, failures and challenges
● Opportunities for teachers to watch, learn from and model successful educational practices across contexts

For West, one of the key benefits of joint working through networks is that ‘collaborative ways of working… can have an impact on how teachers perceive themselves and their work. Specifically, comparisons of practice can lead teachers to view underachieving students in a new light’ (2010: 106).

The existing evidence base is almost universally in agreement that both weaker and higher performing schools benefit from partnership with each other (see for example Poet and Kettlewell 2011 on shared leadership). Stronger schools frequently become more reflective and staff gain opportunities for greater professional challenge, career development and new skills whilst helping weaker schools to improve.

What good practice is there?

The Learning Trust
The Hackney Learning Trust was set up as a social enterprise which replaced the Local Authority in Hackney and is credited with driving improvement in the borough. It has now been ‘spun out’ and provides support both in Hackney and in other boroughs. Its work was recently highlighted in Labour’s Blunkett review (Blunkett 2014). In 2012-13 the trust generated more than £4 million, £600,000 of which was from outside the borough. The
Trust’s opt in approach is highlighted by the fact that ‘100% of schools in Hackney, including all academies, choose to buy services from the Hackney Learning Trust’ (2014: 23). The Trust offers a catalogue of services including school improvement (e.g. leadership and management and teaching support/training), pupil services (education psychology, inclusion), and business services (marketing and finance).

The Hackney Learning Trust is therefore an example of a service provider to schools which is successful because of its strong track record in school improvement. However, its historic local base and strong relationship with schools means that it has acted as a partner in improvement in Hackney schools.

**Creative Partnerships**
Creative Partnerships was launched in 2001 and linked together ‘creatives’ such as artists and musicians and schools in a series of partnerships. The stated aim of Creative Partnerships was to ‘develop and nurture young people’s creativity. They will support arts organisations and creative people working with young people’ (Sharp et al. 2006: 2).

There is evidence to suggest that Creative Partnerships produced modest but tangible improvements to pupils’ educational attainment at Key Stage 4, as well as lower rates of fixed-term exclusions at both primary and secondary level (Rudd et al. 2011). In a separate evaluation, based on case studies of ten London schools’ involvement in the programme, Davies finds that in four of the schools an increase in attainment was attributed to the pupils’ involvement in the creative/cultural partnership, with other schools reporting a range of other learning, skills and developmental outcomes (Davies 2011).

According to Sharp et al (2006) key features of the Creative Partnerships that were successful were:
- Joint willingness to engage in promoting the project goals
- A good idea of what they wanted to achieve (lack of clarity in some cases was a challenge for some partnerships) and their own skills and needs
- Shared willingness to try something new
- A skilled coordinator in schools
- Support from SMT/Head
- Good communication and planning (a failure to establish the necessary infrastructure before launching into delivery was seen as a challenge)
- Distributed responsibility

**The London Leadership Strategy**
The London Leadership Strategy originated as part of the now famous London Challenge programme and sought to promote school-to-school collaboration.

According to Poet and Kettlewell:

> ‘The Leadership Strategies aimed to promote a more systemic approach to the sharing of expertise and knowledge among school leaders, LAs and other stakeholders through local networks. There has been an emphasis on collaboration rather than competition and in
building supportive networks between and within schools across local authority boundaries. This was characterised by school-to-school support and the sharing of practice, ideas and experience between headteachers, senior and middle leaders, and between successful schools and schools in challenging circumstances’ (Poet and Kettlewell 2011: 2).

The core of the program involved school-to-school support, particularly through National Leaders of Education and Local Leaders of Education (there were also elements of teacher development through teaching schools and a series of smaller scale local programs).

According to Rudd et al. (2011: 27) key factors in making the program successful were:
- Bespoke/tailor-made support
- Careful brokerage of relationships/pairings in order to match schools and leaders appropriately
- The building of networks of Head teachers
- Using existing resources (schools) and expertise (heads)
- Working across boundaries
- Mentoring and coaching with a no blame ethos

Following the end of London Challenge, the model of school-to-school collaboration has spread through structures like hub schools, Multi Academy Trusts and Teaching School Alliances. Any such structures should be guided by Ainscow et al.’s principle that “collaboration is at its most powerful where partner schools are carefully matched and know what they are trying to achieve” (2012: 157).

**Achievement for All 3As**
Achievement for All’s mission is to ‘transform the lives of vulnerable and disadvantaged children, young people and their families by raising educational aspirations, access and achievement’ by ‘working in partnership with parents and carers, teachers, leaders and professionals from across the education, health, voluntary, public and private sectors’ (Achievement for All 2014).

The program focuses on four areas:
- Leadership of Achievement for All
- Teaching and Learning
- Parental Engagement (including ‘structured conversations’)
- Wider Outcomes

The program involves using experienced professionals to develop an action plan to address priorities and providing a series of programs to address issues, including brokering in support from partner organisations like Place2Be and ICAN.

The programme’s pilot evaluation notes significant improvements in English and Maths, behaviour, bullying and awareness of SEND (Humphrey and Squires 2011). Factors
highlighted in the evaluation which relate to partnership include the need for:

- Effective strategic support beyond the school level that supports and challenges schools, promotes communication and sharing of ideas and practice
- Links between existing school good practice
- Communication and sharing between schools including resources and expertise
- Involvement of SLT or Head as the lead for the program
- Willingness on the school's part to resource the activity with enough staff time
- The approach to be informed by local context

**Myscience**

Myscience is the UK’s leading organisation for supporting STEM. It is a not-for-profit organisation funded by the Wellcome Trust, the Department for Education and large multinational science companies. Myscience has developed a range of CPD programmes and resources for primary and secondary teachers. In their review of Myscience partnerships, Walker et al. (2013) identify that schools working in partnership with Myscience reported that their primary motivation for entering into partnership was to improve the provision of science education and, consequently, attainment. Asked what they valued about working with Myscience, schools identified:

- Access to funds which allowed them to develop customised, local plans to increase achievement in science
- The outstanding network of expertise accessible through Myscience
- The process-oriented nature of the CPD delivered through the partnership.

**Bankers Trust and Morpeth School**

Bankers Trust is the UK arm of a US-based investment bank, which partnered with Morpeth School - a secondary school in Tower Hamlets - as part of its community development activities. The formal aim of the partnership was to raise the aspirations and levels of achievement of the pupils at Morpeth. From the outset, Bankers Trust intended the school to be a ‘partner rather than a benefactor’, with ground rules established such as that the school would make decisions as to how money would be spent, and that the partnership would be long-term. Between 1995 and 1998 Bankers Trust provided around £200k in funding to Morpeth, with spend going towards a range of projects from IT infrastructure, school trips and the school orchestra, as well as more collaborative work such as the involvement of Bankers Trust staff in designing a trading-based exercise to build into the maths curriculum. In an overview and evaluation of the partnership, Hale argues:

> ‘The power of the partnership is that it truly complements the strategy already being put in place by the management of Morpeth School... the partnership helps to add both resources, manpower and ideas to allow the school to move faster in the direction it was already mapping out’ (Hale 1998: 389).
Conclusion

● ‘Partnership’ covers a wide range of activities, from highly collaborative networking-based approaches, through to less collaborative brokering- and provision-based approaches, where one partner is providing the majority of the inputs.

● The literature suggests the following features of a school partnership are critical to its success:
  › Importance of a shared goal / strategic rationale for the partnership which provides a shared sense of purpose
  › Importance of the credibility and experience of the individuals involved in providing any support
  › Respecting what already works well in a school, and the resources that already exist there; integrating partnerships with this existing practice and expertise
  › Clear lines of communication which allow dialogue and feedback between partners
  › Exposure to different and contrasting practice
  › High levels of trust
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References


“Society should ensure that all young people receive the support they need in order to make a fulfilling transition to adulthood”