



Networking in Programmes

Research review 2022-23



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Introduction

Joining the teaching profession (in any guise) means becoming a member of a professional community committed to improving student learning (Hammerness *et al.*, 2005), and subscribing to a set of agreed standards (DfE, 2013). This includes a commitment to continuing professional development, described as being effective when seen as a partnership between headteachers, leadership teams, teachers and providers of professional development expertise, training or consultancy (DfE, 2016).

Networking covers a wide range of ideas and ways of working in partnership. This may be working with an individual or group of people known to us and finding mutual value in working together for a shared purpose. This may take the form of a network or system of interconnected people; collaboration to produce a piece of work or resource; networking or interacting to exchange information and develop professional social contacts, or a community of people considered a unit because of shared interests, social groups or

nationality. It may also be about finding support for wellbeing more widely.

Whether we call it collaboration, networking or something else, working with others in partnership is a powerful force in education. It can deepen the learning and engagement of both pupils and adults, it enhances the professional capital of teachers and leaders, and it can be a positive force for whole system change (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016).

Central to successful partnership is a shared purpose and the trust to work together to make collective progress – putting ‘we’ above ‘I’. Feeling part of a partnership or network enables people to feel part of something bigger and build relationships to support them. Collaboration with peers can result in real, useful outcomes, and these relationships and collaborations can lead to the enactment of systemic change.

Theoretical perspectives

Theoretical approaches can help us to understand when and how to network, and the conditions that are likely to engender successful networks (Muijs, West and Ainscow, 2010).

According to (Muijs, West and Ainscow, 2010), network theory can be seen in terms of four distinct theoretical perspectives:

1. Constructivist organisational theory
2. the theory of social capital
3. 'New Social Movements' theory
4. Durkheimian network theory

(see Goals and theories table below)

The evidence of the impact of networking on school effectiveness and improvement is limited, though some studies show a positive impact on pupil outcomes, and others on teachers. One of the key advantages is the ability to contextualise improvement programmes, or build on otherwise limited internal capacity (Muijs, West and Ainscow, 2010).

Research findings suggest different effects in different areas with evidence:

- strongest (but moderate) that collaboration can widen opportunities and address vulnerable groups of learners
- moderate that collaboration is effective in helping to solve immediate problems
- modest to weak in raising expectations (Muijs, West and Ainscow, 2010, p. 16)

Networks

Networks can take different forms, but essentially they are about creating a community of connections. In educational terms this may take the form of collaboration intended to support and develop the engagement and learning of students and adults; to enhance professional capital; and as a positive force for school improvement (Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan, 2016). However, networks can also be about forming communities for support.

Insights from Teach for All describe a networked approach as requiring transparency, shared

leadership, and ownership by the network members (Johnstone, no date).

Outward facing

Research into 'thriving' schools, schools that are sustaining good results whilst also maintaining positive working conditions for staff, showed the importance of being outward facing. The schools involved were often involved in local, regional or national initiatives and networks. They also frequently visited and received visits from other schools, exchanging teaching materials and were open to sharing insights (Teach First, 2020).

Self-improving systems

Networking and collaboration have become a greater focus with a perceived increase in the demand for higher levels of innovation in education. This may stem from greater political interest in education's role in a globalised economy. A move towards networks can be seen as part of a realignment of political relationships which see schools increasingly belonging to a variety of structures, from local authorities to federations and multi-academy trusts (Muijs, West and Ainscow, 2010).

Lieberman explores the use of technology and associates it with educational reform communities as being better placed to form collaborative environments. She sees them as being flexible, borderless, and innovative, in contrast to school systems which are organised bureaucratically and are more resistant to change. She highlights a range of studies looking at how collaborative structures inside schools support teachers, but also how networks and partnerships external to schools act to mobilise and engage teachers in their own learning and provide more extensive development opportunities (Lieberman, 2000).

Hargreaves looked at the idea of a self-improving school-led system based on the idea that clusters of schools working together can lead localised improvement. They share professional expertise and pool resources more efficiently (Hargreaves, 2010). Since that time, the government has embraced the idea and promoted multi-academy

trusts (MATs), reducing local authority oversight and creating school-to-school support models in the form of teaching school hubs. This approach has been re-affirmed in the most recent education white paper (HM Government, 2022).

A 2019 paper looking at school improvement through school-to-school support emphasised the importance of place-based networks in order to counter variation in provision and improve social mobility in disadvantaged areas (Greatbatch and Tate, 2019).

Research into multi-school groups and sustainable improvement found that most MATs and federations were attempting to adopt a partnership approach to implementing strategy. They found three common models for structuring school improvement: school-to-school support, centralised and earned autonomy (with most adopting hybrid models) (Greany, 2018).

Peer support

Evidence from a multiplicity of sources emphasises the role of peer support, both emotional and practical. It can increase confidence, mood and wellbeing, whilst also delivering better outcomes. Drawing on lived experience or shared characteristics makes this different from other sources of support, such as coaching. Reciprocity is a key benefit (Graham and Rutherford, 2016).

Building trust

A strong culture is one where everyone shares values and beliefs and communicates these clearly and consistently (Shafer, 2018). Relationships and trust are the foundation to a culture of effective collaboration and effecting change. Social networks can be a source of power outside traditional hierarchies (Stephenson, 2005). Clear trust and support among staff builds confidence from the 'circle of safety' (Sinek, 2017).

*Relationships are the true
medium of knowledge
exchange, and trust is the
glue that holds them all
together.*

(Stephenson, 2005, p. 248)

Wellbeing is deeply linked to our sense of social connectedness (Ashcroft and Caroe, 2014).

Humans are happier and more effective when:

- they can talk to someone about personal matters confidentially and without judgement
- someone understands their personal goals and aims
- someone can help them when they need help
- there's someone they can rely on in the long term

(Graham and Rutherford, 2016, p. 7)

Theories	Goals		
	School Improvement	Broadening opportunities	Sharing resources
Constructivism	Learning communities developed around joint subject groups	Schools work with local businesses and agencies to develop a better understanding of how to jointly address the needs of the local community.	Schools put in place joint professional development programmes, where all schools in the network share the development of training resources.
Social Capital	Schools develop a supportive leadership network, where heads share their different areas of expertise in finance, marketing, and learning.	Schools collaborate in curriculum provision by using the resources (e.g., industrial kitchen) in one school for courses across the network.	Schools collaborate in hiring external consultants and developers for joint CPD events.
New Social Movements	Schools come together to develop their own school improvement services outwith the LEA under the auspices of an activist head.	Schools decide to form a network with local businesses and schools from another LEA to develop new curricular offerings.	Schools join to lobby the LEA for additional resources under the leadership of the new head of one of the local schools.
Durkheimian network theory	Schools serving a disadvantaged community form a network to develop shared working so staff can gain mutual support.	Schools suffering falling pupil numbers develop a joint curriculum in order to avoid closing provision seen as valuable to the community but with small student numbers in any one school.	Schools decide to collaborate with the local church to share the church hall to develop parental outreach outside a school environment.

(Source: Table 2: Goals and theories, in Muijs, West and Ainscow, 2010, p. 13)

Peer-to-peer networks

Peer-to-peer networks can be formed between individuals or groups of individuals for specific or multiple purposes. They may be for the particular purpose of collaborating around elements of teaching and learning, or for professional development, but may also be for the purpose of support and building a sense of connection.

Teacher collaboration

A number of systematic reviews and analyses of the available evidence around continuous professional development, focusing specifically on elements that are linked to positive pupil impact, have highlighted the importance of collaborative approaches (Cordingley *et al.*, 2012).

Networks can be highly effective vehicles for improving teaching and learning (Cordingley, Bell and Jopling, 2005).

CPD, together with the moral purpose that flows from a clear focus on particular outcomes for identified groups of students, was found to be the key to effective learning networks.

(Cordingley *et al.*, 2012, p. 9)

Most existing teacher collaboration focuses on conversations and exchanges of ideas between teachers. It has been suggested that focusing on joint work and a collective sense of responsibility to improve teaching practice would be better.

Four types of collaboration are described:

1. storytelling and scanning for ideas
2. aid and assistance
3. sharing methods and materials
4. joint work

There is no intended hierarchy with the different levels of interdependence, and each can be

important for teacher development (de Jong, Meirink and Admiraal, 2019).

Trainee teachers

'Buy in' is vital to longevity in a teaching career and the perception that the 'actor', or participant in a network, is perceived as behaving in a manner appropriate in the eyes of others. For trainees joining networks, the power to act and be accepted is a vital element in creating a legitimate relationship in which they can gain and use support, as well as participate in decision making (Hammerness *et al.*, 2005).

Recent research found that trainee teachers with more relationships in the profession were more likely to achieve qualified teacher status (Fox *et al.*, 2021).

Within departments/teams

One of the challenges of working in a team is recognising that it is composed of unique individuals whilst also seeking to develop commonalities and patterns for unity. Kim Scott talks about superstars and rockstars – the superstars are those keen to take on responsibility and progress, the rockstars those who are just being brilliant on a daily basis in the classroom. If we try to force them into other roles then this can cause stress. However, priorities may change and individuals pursue different routes. The role of the team leader is to understand how individuals see themselves, how you see them and how to achieve alignment (Scott, 2019) (Robbins, 2021).

Research into middle leadership has identified team and interpersonal factors as being one of three characteristics central to effectiveness. In particular, three characteristics and behaviours were salient:

1. being open, consultative and collaborative
2. communication and diplomacy
3. knowing, developing and building a team

A literature review as part of the research suggests that effective middle leaders have strong relationships with their team members, and have good people and communication skills (Baars *et al.*, 2015).

Across the school

Whilst teachers make rapid gains in effectiveness early in their careers, more modest progress ensues. However, in school environments which are more supportive, and include frequent teacher collaboration, teachers improve at faster rates than those where this support is absent (Kraft and Papay, 2014).

Understanding how information flows through an organisation is linked to the network of relationships. Stevenson provides a model that describes three archetypes: hubs, gatekeepers and pulsetakers. Hubs are the most connected and are effective multitaskers who can spread information rapidly (and therefore also embody an element of risk). The gatekeepers provide links or bridges which can speed or slow progress. Pulsetakers are the unseen connectors who carry influence and are key to succession and initiation (Stephenson, 2005).

Beyond the school

Teachers can be members of formal networks such as unions or subject associations. They may also be part of networks through ITT providers or MATs. There are also multiple opportunities to form informal personal networks through social media or other connections such as alumni groups. These can function as sounding boards for mutual moral support, or for additional collaboration and resource sharing.

Leadership

Leaders can benefit from ongoing peer support, someone who acts as a critical friend or 'listening ear' but includes a degree of challenge, as well as

collaborative networks focusing on the development of practice, problem solving and sharing learning (MacBeath, 2011).

Collaboration has demonstrated positive impacts on individual leaders: improved capacity to manage change, greater experimentation with approaches; and augmented leadership opportunities (Cordingley *et al.*, 2012).

However there can also be negative impacts of networking. Negative impacts of networking include additional workload and pressure (Hadfield and Chapman, 2009). The research also highlights failures amongst many collaborations and the contributory role of leadership.

There is a tension between seeing networks of personal contacts as vital, or possibly unethical – relying on 'who you know' rather than 'what you know'. Strategic networking can enable leaders to capitalise on knowledge for the core business or organisation (Ibarra and Hunter, 2007).

Creating educationally powerful connections is one dimension of leadership highlighted by Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009) as having a positive impact on student outcomes, although the effect size is not quantified.

The network of social relationships across teams is central to successful leadership, and for inspiring change. Straightforward hierarchies mask the power held within social networks. A cultural knowledge map of organisations can be insightful: With whom do you work directly? To whom do you turn for advice? To whom do you look for new ideas and new information? With whom do you collaborate and socialise? (Stephenson, 2005).

THE THREE FORMS OF NETWORKING

Managers who think they are adept at networking are often operating only at an operational or personal level. Effective leaders learn to employ networks for strategic purposes.

	Operational	Personal	Strategic
Purpose	Getting work done efficiently; maintaining the capacities and functions required of the group.	Enhancing personal and professional development; providing referrals to useful information and contacts.	Figuring out future priorities and challenges; getting stakeholder support for them.
Location and temporal orientation	Contacts are mostly internal and oriented toward current demands.	Contacts are mostly external and oriented toward current interests and future potential interests.	Contacts are internal and external and oriented toward the future.
Players and recruitment	Key contacts are relatively nondiscretionary; they are prescribed mostly by the task and organizational structure, so it is very clear who is relevant.	Key contacts are mostly discretionary; it is not always clear who is relevant.	Key contacts follow from the strategic context and the organizational environment, but specific membership is discretionary; it is not always clear who is relevant.
Network attributes and key behaviors	Depth: building strong working relationships.	Breadth: reaching out to contacts who can make referrals.	Leverage: creating inside-outside links.

(Source: Ibarra and Hunter, 2007)

Impact

Teacher collaboration to drive school improvement is frequently called for, without there being detailed evidence of its impact on student achievement (Goddard, Goddard and Tschannen-Moran, 2007).

School-to-school networks

There is a consensus that in reducing LA oversight and encouraging the creation of MATs, the government approach has been to encourage a self-improving school-led system (SISS), following the publication of the White Paper, the *Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010). This has been supported by the creation of teaching school alliances, and recently teaching school hubs, and the deployment of national leaders of education (NLEs) (Armstrong, 2015; Greany and Higham, 2018; Greatbatch and Tate, 2019).

The remit of teaching schools is:

1. school-led initial teacher training
2. professional and leadership development
3. school-to-school support

However, there is over-representation of secondary schools and schools with less deprived intakes in the teaching school cohort. (Greatbatch and Tate, 2019).

NFER analysis published in 2017 suggested that there was significant capacity for collaboration in the system as most in-need schools are geographically close to one or more high-performing schools. However, there is variation between phases and regionally, with secondary being fewer in number and more geographically distributed (Wespiesser, Sumner and Bernardinelli, 2017).

Purpose

Inter-school networking doesn't always have to be organised around pupil learning in order to be fruitful. Collaboration may also be around providing a full range of services to pupils but also to save costs through joint bids or scalable CPD.

Network goals can be broadly defined as:

- school improvement
- broadening opportunities (including non-school agencies)
- resource sharing

(Muijs, West and Ainscow, 2010, p. 7). These different purposes may also be distinguished by varying timescales.

Impact

There is limited evidence for direct impact of inter-school collaboration on pupil outcomes, but research suggests that it can nevertheless have a positive influence on teachers and teaching, as well as providing opportunities for leadership development (Armstrong, 2015).

Recent changes to national pupil assessment models and accountability measures mean that there is a lack of empirical evidence for judging the impact of MATs or TSAs (Greatbatch and Tate, 2019).

There has been little research into the types of collaboration between schools, particularly on less formal structures of collaboration, of the DfE's programmes of NLEs, LLEs, or SLEs (Greatbatch and Tate, 2019).

A recent report for the LGA reported that whilst 92% of council-run schools were ranked outstanding or good by Ofsted in January 2022, only 85% of academies had been graded similarly since conversion. It also found that only 45% of academies already in existence in August 2018 managed to improve standards from RI or Inadequate, compared with 56% of council-maintained schools (Angel Solutions, 2022). These findings have been criticised by the DfE for failing to recognise that the academisation programme had taken many underperforming schools out of local authority control, therefore inevitably skewing the proportion of quality schools remaining under local authority control (DfE, 2022).

Hierarchies and competition

The self-improving school-led system (SISS) as described by Greany and Higham (2018) suggests that increases to operational autonomy for schools have been balanced by changes to the accountability system which ensures a continued need to focus on national exam results and preparing for Ofsted inspection.

School 'system leaders', including national leaders of education (NLEs) and teaching school

alliance (TSA) leaders and now teaching school hubs (TSH), face significant pressure to support rapid improvement in other schools whilst protecting against a drop in performance at their own (Greany and Higham, 2018).

The vast majority of schools engage in some form of collaboration with other schools, usually locally. Local authority encouragement of primary schools to join 'improvement-focused' clusters was often problematic (Greany and Higham, 2018). As a result there is growing emphasis on the importance of trust between schools as a condition for inter-school collaboration (Greatbatch and Tate, 2019).

Teaching school alliances have been characterised as following three approaches: hierarchical alliances (one lead school dominates and benefits disproportionately), exclusive alliances (a subset of higher performing schools secure their own performance by limiting opportunities for other schools), and marketised alliances (lead school/s sells services in a transactional way with limited reciprocity or commitment to ongoing partnership) (Greany and Higham, 2018).

NAHT calls for school improvement to be a collaborative endeavour, within and between schools as a way of enriching teachers' learning and spreading expertise. However, it recognises that the current system incentivises competition over collaboration and calls for a change to redress the balance (NAHT, 2020).

Peer-to-peer review

The Accountability Commission in 2018 identified peer review as a potentially positive means of schools helping each other to improve, as part of a self-led system where peer review and collaborative working are the norm (NAHT, 2019).

Key principles for good school-to-school peer review (NAHT, 2019):

- shared responsibility for and commitment to better outcomes for all
- action-focused reviews with sustained support

- rigorous and objective appraisal of evidence
- structured and robust
- expert- and evidence-led with trained reviewers
- done with, not to – including school workforce and reciprocated
- open and trusted
- builds deeper relationships for collaborative partnerships over time
- commitment to continuous improvement

Importantly, it should not be a mock inspection or result in a written report by an external reviewer in isolation.

Joint practice development

JPD has been proposed as a description of the process by which schools and individuals learn from each other, a process that involves interaction and mutual development rather than simply a transfer of knowledge (Sebba, Kent and Tregenza, 2012).

Ten processes have been suggested as key to supporting JPD across a teaching school alliance:

1. clearly articulated aims and improvement priorities
2. developing trust
3. building on existing relationships and networks between teachers
4. developing effective networks requires careful thinking and planning
5. recognition of respective roles and contributions
6. multilevel (distributed) and multisite leadership
7. challenge and support
8. knowledge that meets local needs
9. student participation in decision-making and governance
10. addressing competing priorities

(Sebba, Kent and Tregenza, 2012).

Teaching school hubs

The teaching school hub programme is designed to provide high-quality professional development to teachers at all stages of their careers by delivering:

- school-based initial teacher training
- the Early Career Framework
- new specialist national professional qualifications (NPQs)
- leadership NPQs
- appropriate body services for early career teachers

They will be funded for three years with an annual grant subject to demonstrating performance against key performance indicators. Each hub serves a defined area and must serve all schools within it.

There are 87 teaching school hubs by area.¹

The teaching school hubs council (TSHC) performs an advisory function to the network as well as a capacity building function.

¹

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1016161/List_of_teaching_school_hubs_by_area.pdf

[016161/List of teaching school hubs by area.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1016161/List_of_teaching_school_hubs_by_area.pdf) [accessed 21/10/21]

Social media

Many people have experienced the polarised nature of social media, with opposing sides taking extreme positions in a binary fashion. A study looking at polarising actually found that echo chambers could become less polarised if they were egalitarian. It is influencers' bias that can be amplified through a group, whereas in an egalitarian network, ideas are spread on merit (Centola, 2020).

classroom or for extra-curricular activities. Care should be taken to ensure safeguarding provision is made and monitored.

Personal accounts

Social media offers unlimited opportunities to engage other members of the profession beyond your school. #EduTwitter can be an invaluable source of support, resources and ideas, as well as an interesting insight into the sources of debate within the profession. Numerous subject-specific and exam board groups also exist on facebook for more specific information and interaction. It is important to remember that social media is public and everything you post is public; even in a private group it is possible for screenshots to be taken and shared. Whilst anonymity is not essential, care should be taken not to share confidential materials about pupils or your school that could breach GDPR regulations or safeguarding. It would be advisable to consider privacy settings and what personal information you share publicly where it could be seen by pupils or parents, or the wider community around the school. Account must also be taken of any social media policies put in place by your employer (notwithstanding your right to a personal life).

Use of a pseudonym is one option.

School accounts

School accounts can often be a good way to connect with both families and the local community, advertising events and successes. They may also be helpful to share important information rapidly in some circumstances – though it should always be remembered that not all will have access to social media.

Some schools also use social media accounts to engage with pupils in academic study beyond the

Broader education networks

[A network is] at least two organisations working together for a common purpose for at least some of the time.

(Muijs, West and Ainscow, 2010)

A broad definition such as this encompasses a wider range of networks and includes not only schools but other organisations (Muijs, West and Ainscow, 2010).

When a network is founded on trust, its potential for scaling impact drastically increases. Building effective trusting relationships results in improved quality of work. Trust isn't synonymous with agreement or friendship, but means a willingness to engage in authentic, often uncomfortable, conversations about the things that challenge us and put up divisions between people. Problem solving together can create bonds that demonstrate value and endure. Shared vulnerability can also foster greater and deeper connectivity.

The formulation of partnerships and use of external expertise, matched to network needs, directly supports the achievement of network goals, and thus impacts on pupil learning. Highly effective networks attended more to the quality of the collaboration than to the size of the network, and were organised and structured to include everyone who had a contribution to make to reach the network's goals.

(Cordingley *et al.*, 2012, p. 9)

Some networks involve partnerships with organisations outside school, for example universities, local authorities, local community groups, or local businesses.

Examples of collaborative activities include:

- sharing the learning experiences as a site team (teachers teaching teachers), applying the experiences in the school and community, exploring the learning with others and repeating the shared training (the conference workshops) each year
- participation in collaborative meetings and recording and analysing critical incidents in narrative accounts of significant classroom events
- action research-based professional development involving a commitment to reciprocity and the creation of structures for sharing learning
- project staff working with district partners, an inclusion mentorship programme and a three-day training institute each summer
- peer teams providing opportunities for sharing and mutual support through training, with further mentoring support coming from university staff

(Cordingley, Bell and Jopling, 2005, p. 15)

Communities of practice

First proposed by Lave and Wenger in their 1991 book, *Situated Learning*, a community of practice is a group of people with a shared concern or interest in something who interact regularly in order to learn how to do it better. They can complement existing more formal structures and galvanise knowledge sharing, learning and challenge. They can be difficult to build and sustain given their organic and spontaneous nature. Generally they function best outside of oversight and can't be mandated, but benefit from nurturing by bringing the right people together and providing a nourishing infrastructure that recognises their value (Wenger and Snyder, 2000).

Educational networks are particularly well suited to making use of technology as they focus on

creating collaborative environments in a flexible way. They are able to work outside of traditional hierarchies and bureaucracies that often stifle schools. They are also based on the interests and needs of the participants, rather than the

institution. These networks can function as learning communities (Lieberman, 2000).

A Snapshot Comparison				
Communities of practice, formal work groups, teams, and informal networks are useful in complementary ways. Below is a summary of their characteristics.				
	What's the purpose?	Who belongs?	What holds it together?	How long does it last?
Community of practice	To develop members' capabilities; to build and exchange knowledge	Members who select themselves	Passion, commitment, and identification with the group's expertise	As long as there is interest in maintaining the group
Formal work group	To deliver a product or service	Everyone who reports to the group's manager	Job requirements and common goals	Until the next reorganization
Project team	To accomplish a specified task	Employees assigned by senior management	The project's milestones and goals	Until the project has been completed
Informal network	To collect and pass on business information	Friends and business acquaintances	Mutual needs	As long as people have a reason to connect

(Source: A summary of the characteristics of different networks, Wenger and Snyder, 2000)

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