

**PRIMARY STRATEGY LEARNING NETWORKS:  
A LOCAL STUDY OF A NATIONAL INITIATIVE**

**by**

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## ABSTRACT

Although there is limited research into the success of primary school networking initiatives in the UK, there seems to be an unquestioning faith displayed at national Government level for school collaborative working arrangements as a key means for driving forward whole school improvement. This research considers the possible benefits and challenges of one such initiative – *Primary Strategy Learning Networks* (DfES, 2004a).

The research focuses on a reliance on school networks as power bases for promoting a national standards agenda. It considers the impact of an imposed model of school collaboration on the fluid nature of networking. It also acknowledges the benefits of a ‘network balance’ between the positive and negative features that impact on a network’s success and sustainability. Furthermore, the research explores the impact of power, authority and influence on the sustainability of networks.

This is a qualitative study and data is gathered through interviews with network headteacher participants in two Primary Strategy Learning Networks over the course of an academic year. The research is also informed by an initial study of a *Networked Learning Community* (Hopkins and Jackson, 2002). Following an analysis of the findings, a number of recommendations are made. A suggested ‘ideal’ model for productive networking relationships among key stakeholders is offered for consideration and a *Realistic Approach* (Pawson, 2006) to evaluating such initiatives is argued to ensure a higher degree of success in implementing collaborative working practices for school improvement.

**DEDICATION**

**To my father**

**ALFRED JAMES DAY**

**who gave me the gift of tenacity**

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND DEFINITIONS

CPD	Continual Professional Development (of school teachers and non teaching staff)
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families (the official Government body responsible for standards and education in UK schools)
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment (currently known as DCSF – definition as above)
DfES	Department for Education and Skills (formerly DfEE - currently known as DCSF – definition as above)
FFT	Fischer Family Trust (a national pupil performance database of over 10 million pupils in England and Wales)
LEA	Local Education Authority (currently known as Local Authority – definition as below)
LA	Local Authority (the body of officers at Local Government level responsible for Children’s Services including standards and education)
LMS	Local Management of Schools (a scheme introduced in 1990 gave delegated powers for budgets to maintained schools in England and Wales)
LPSH	Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers (introduced in 1998 to offer nationally recognised professional development and accreditation to experienced headteachers)
NCSL	National College for School Leadership (an organisation set up by the Labour Government in November 2000 to build capacity for leadership in UK schools)
NLC	Networked Learning Communities ( <a href="http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/sie/si/eips/existingmodels/nlc">http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/sie/si/eips/existingmodels/nlc</a> - an initiative launched in 2002 by DfES in partnership with NCSL and the Innovations Unit - see appendix i for further details)
NLS	National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998) (a non-statutory national framework for teaching literacy in schools)
NNS	National Numeracy Strategy (DfEE, 1999) (a non-statutory national framework for teaching numeracy in schools)
NPQH	National Professional Qualification for Headship (nationally recognised professional development and accreditation for aspiring headteachers or those new into headship and a mandatory requirement from 2004)
OfSTED	Office for Standards in Education (the national body responsible for inspecting standards in UK schools)

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND DEFINITIONS (continued)

PPA	Planning, Preparation and Marking (from 2005, a statutory allocation of 10% non teaching time during the working week for teachers to plan and prepare lessons and to assess and mark pupils' work)
PSLN	Primary Strategy Learning Network ( <a href="http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/wholeschool/learning_networks/">http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/wholeschool/learning_networks/</a> accessed on 22/07/07 - an initiative launched in 2005 by DfES in partnership with Primary National Strategies, SureStart and the Innovations Unit - see appendix ii for further details)
ROL	RAISEonline ( <a href="http://www.raiseonline.org">http://www.raiseonline.org</a> - a national web based data system available to schools)
SATs	Standard Assessment Tasks (national assessment tasks and tests administered to 7 year olds and 11 year olds in English primary schools)
SF	Standards Funds (Government ring fenced allocations of funds directly to schools for spending on school effectiveness and school improvement)
TA	Teaching Assistant (classroom support personnel with no qualified teacher status)
UA	Unitary Authority (the abolition of the two-tier structure of Local Government in Scotland, Wales and some parts of England from 1996 and replacement with unitary authorities responsible for all Local Government services)











By 2002, the Government had committed to collaborative initiatives such as the National College for School Leadership's *Networked Learning Communities* (Hopkins and Jackson, 2002), thus acknowledging the value of practitioner research as a key tool for developing innovative practices and school improvement. The *Specialist Schools* (DfES, 2003a) initiative was also being centrally promoted to spread innovation through collaboration.

Many other initiatives were also introduced in the second term of New Labour such as the upskilling of classroom assistants to reduce teachers' workload; and a review of the inspection process towards greater school self evaluation. But any suggestion that the face of the Government had changed to one of support and celebration of success was still not fully realised (Brighouse, 2001). The comment that "improvement has happened, but transformation has not yet begun" (Brighouse, 2001, p 29) was still true even at the start of the third term of Government office.

#### *Labour's third term – 2005 to present day*

Measures being taken in more recent times have led towards the development of a renewed relationship with schools and one which the Government has actively promoted. This has come about in a number of ways including the introduction of lighter touch inspections, which began in September 2005, with school self evaluation central to the process (OfSTED, 2004). Additionally, increased funding streams direct to schools have further minimised local authority control over the purse strings. However, in this context of reduced 'middle level management' of schools:

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. (Hopkins and Jackson, 2002, p 9)

One could argue that support of networks through direct funding lines not only helps to rebuild relationships with schools but also provide a new and powerful vehicle for driving Government reforms forward. This could be seen as a further move to sideline local authorities, continuing to disempower them in their influence on educational policy and practice, and counteracting what has been seen by some as local authorities “buttressing the status quo [rather] than supporting change” (Hopkins and Jackson, 2002, p 9). However, some might argue that this subsequent change in the Government’s policy orientation could be interpreted as using those educational practices favoured by the profession to political advantage.

Additionally, the pressure on politicians globally to intervene in state education has resulted in an attempt in England to modernize school cultures (Wallace, 2003). The impact of the 1988 Education Reform Act which introduced financial delegation to schools, along with active promotion of competition among schools, had led to system fragmentation (Glatter, 2003). Secondary school collaborative working arrangements, such as the 14-19 Strategy (DfES, 2005) and primary school networking initiatives such as the PSLN (DfES, 2004a), could arguably be considered as purposeful moves toward “a new search for integration, coherence and systematic change” (Wallace and Hall, 1994, in Glatter, 2003, p 17). Undeniably, inter-school collaborative working practices are becoming an integral part of Government initiatives to improve educational practice, academic standards and pupil achievement (Connolly and James, 2006).







### **The key research questions**

To recall, the overarching aim of this thesis is to consider the success and sustainability of a centrally imposed model of school collaboration for driving forward educational reform. In order to offer an insight into the challenges of large scale educational reform in general and the complexities of managing the PSLN initiative as such, the first key research question in this thesis is:

- What lessons have already been learned about large scale educational reform?  
(This will be answered from the literature review.)

Then, to explore what is already known about effective collaborative practices and whether these have been considered in introducing such a radical change in primary school working arrangements, the second key research question is:

- What lessons have already been learned about the common characteristics of networks and to what extent has this informed the PSLN initiative? (This will be answered from the literature review *and* the empirical research.)

Next, as a means of investigating the benefits and challenges of the PSLN 'model' when put into practice, the third key research question is:

- What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of this particular model of collaborative working for moving primary education forward? (This is answered from the empirical research.)

Finally, to draw conclusions on this centrally imposed model, its success and its sustainability, the fourth key research question is:

- Do any problems arise from a centrally directed approach towards such an initiative? (This is answered from the empirical research.)

































the history of government driven school collaborative practices militate against this (Rudd, 2003), thus posing a number of questions. Can true inter-school collaboration be achieved whilst performance league tables still hold such an important position both politically and publicly? Furthermore, can it be achieved when government policy promises parental choice of schooling and thus encourages a competing market? And, finally, can it be achieved when individual school funding is based heavily on pupil numbers and weighting and a pressure on schools to 'sell' a service? Hall and Southworth (1997), in their research into headship, note:

Heads have had to adapt to the ideology of an 'educational market'. The increase in competition between schools for pupils has, in part, led to a concomitant need for heads to be entrepreneurial in promoting the school and securing resources for it. Without doubt, the 'selling of schools' has advanced. (Hall and Southworth, 1997, p 166)

Lowndes and Skelcher (1998) substantiate this point when they remark that their research shows:

... that the network style relationships often associated with partnership working – resting on trust and mutuality – are threatened, or undermined, by the imperative to compete [to ensure survival]. (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998, p 326)

Although these comments were made in the first term of the New Labour Government, this paradox of collaboration being driven forward as a major reform to raise standards within an 'educational market' of competition is further acknowledged and substantiated in more recent literature (Brighouse, 2001; Evans *et al*, 2003; Connolly and James, 2006; Woods *et al*, 2006). Fullan (2001), in his subsequent work, suggests a framework for leading complex change, which consists of the five key components of moral purpose, understanding change, coherence making, relationship building, knowledge creation and sharing. The author reinforces the importance of leadership and puts this at the core of any successful change













Other terminology that exists for groups of schools working together are development groups which are generally LA co-ordinated, and families of schools which can be groups of same phase schools or be made up of a secondary school and its feeder primaries usually serving a specific geographical location (Busher and Hodgkinson, 1996). These authors found that the terms families and clusters were often interpreted as one and the same by teachers in their research. Busher and Hodgkinson, (1996) also note that budgets were often used as power tools by some schools over their families. Certainly clusters, families and development groups seem more nebulous in their nature, interchangeable in their terminology and may or may not have geographical location and LA co-ordination in common.

Glatter (2003) introduces the notion of partnerships also as being ‘slippery’ terminology when discussed in term of networks. This is supported by Rudd (2003) who notes that the term ‘partnership’ is widely used, but ill defined and could range from a description of a two-school arrangement to groups of schools working together. Most of the partnerships in Rudd’s (2003) research are predominantly formal, with an agreed structure for working (p 4). Lowndes and Skelcher (1998) note a distinction between partnerships and networks, where the former is not always as cosy as the latter. Networks, according to these authors, “seem to be based on trust, loyalty and reciprocity” (p 318), whereas they see partnerships as including command, control and competition. A synopsis of all these definitions of collaborative working arrangements for primary schools is included in table ii overleaf although, in reality, the lines of demarcation between each type of collaborative are much less distinct than portrayed in table ii and the characteristics of different types of collaborations overlap in definition.







































































































































































































































































































































































































































