National College
for School Leadership

Leading a self-improving school system

David H Hargreaves

Resource

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"Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision, the ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results."

Henry Ford, industrialist

"One of the core values of [our firm] is that nothing is impossible... we encourage a philosophy of forget for the moment if [an idea] is going to be practical, just think. If the outcome would be so outrageously good that it is worth pursuing, then we will find a way to do it."

Anonymous executive, pharmaceutical firm

"At any point it would have been easier to say, 'this is too difficult. Let's go back to the old way and split the plane up'... none of the three companies, individually, had the resources or the technology to make this happen. It took a collective team effort - pushing each other beyond our wildest dreams - to build this airplane."

Martin Taylor, BAE manager for the joint strike fighter

Introduction

For England's school leaders, the coalition government's white paper The Importance of Teaching (HM Government, 2010) strikes a startling new note. The improvement of schools, they are now told, rests primarily with them – not with government, local or central. The aim should be to create a self-improving system, built on the premise that teachers learn best from one another and should be more in control of their professional and institutional development than they have been in recent years. To this end, a self-improving system is to be led by newly designated teaching schools and the strategic alliances they establish with partners.

In my own conversations with school leaders since the publication of the white paper, I have detected very different reactions. Some are excited by this new direction of travel; others are apprehensive about what it means; and yet others, probably the majority, have distinctly mixed feelings, waiting for the dust to settle before they make up their minds. Is this really a thrilling opportunity by which, over time, school leaders assume responsibility for the transformation of our school system? Or is this a minor distraction as schools face the grim realities of economic crisis?

In this second thinkpiece on the concept of a self-improving system of schools, I argue that the government's offer to the profession to lead the construction of a self-improving school system is an exciting one that should be taken up with enthusiasm. The first thinkpiece, Creating a self-improving school system (Hargreaves, 2010), explored the idea and its possible application to English schools. This new thinkpiece examines the opportunities and hazards that lie ahead as teaching schools and their strategic alliances come on stream, with a particular focus on the roles and responsibilities of school leaders. What is involved in a teaching school strategic alliance attaining maturity?

National teaching schools: the new model

The planned teaching schools do not start from scratch but build on previous models of school-based initial teacher training (ITT) and continuing professional development:

— the teaching schools in City Challenge, originally pioneered by George Berwick

— the training schools developed by the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA)

— the many examples of varied forms of inter-school partnership that have been developed in recent years

The new teaching schools,[1] based on the concept of the teaching hospital, are to be a critical element in a more self-improving school system. The first cohort of 100 teaching schools, meeting stringent criteria for designation, will begin work in September 2011. By 2014-15 there will be some 500 teaching schools that 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

An area of concern and contention is the relationship between a teaching school, its alliance partners and other local schools. It is not intended that a teaching school should in every way be better or more advanced than its partners. Certainly it has to be an outstanding school in Ofsted terms, but its task, as in any strategic alliance, is to be the network's hub or the nodal school[2] that offers strategic leadership, and co-ordinates, monitors and quality assures alliance activities and expertise. The teaching school is not the positional, top-dog type of leader, but rather the leader who has the right knowledge and skills (competence) to engage in the right kind of processes that produce the intended results of the partnership. In this, teaching schools have something to learn from strategic alliances in other sectors.

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[1] See www.nationalcollege.org.uk/docinfo?id=146256&filename=teaching-schools-prospectus.pdf.
[2] The term is derived from the business world and is explained in Hargreaves (2010).

Complex collaboration: a vision and some lessons from other sectors

The language used to describe and explain teaching schools is significant. Although ostensibly based on the teaching hospital, the key concept of strategic alliance evokes the widespread use of the term in the world of business and industry. Partnership can easily become a soft, warm and cuddly process of unchallenging relationships between professionals to achieve some modest outcome. Most teachers have experience of such partnerships, commonly with another member of staff on a clear task in the same school. Complex collaboration is different, in that goals are ambitious, many people are involved, tasks are less clear, agendas differ (sometimes quite sharply) and most important of all, the partners come from different organisations with distinctive histories and cultures.

So does the term alliance herald a form of partnership that is tougher and more challenging than what the profession is used to? The need in the 21st century to abandon the crude factory model of schooling has become a truism of educational writing. But such sensible aversion to an analogy between schooling and mass-production manufacturing industry does not mean we cannot learn from business and industry. The introduction by ministers of the term strategic alliance provokes an examination of what might be learned from the business world.

I draw on business sectors where strategic alliances of various kinds have grown dramatically over the last two decades. Information technology, biotechnology and pharmaceutical firms live in an environment that is 'complex, ambiguous and highly competitive' (Oliver, 2009) and engage in alliances to (i) become more efficient, and, in a world of international competition, (ii) achieve market superiority. But these two are not the only motives. In addition, firms want to share knowledge and enhance their learning to become more innovative, turning new ideas into the rapid applications of better products and services (Kogut, 1988). Alliances where the primary objective of the partners is to learn from each other have been called learning alliances (Khanna, Gulati & Nohria, 1998) and it is here that I detect a fruitful parallel between firms and schools.

Now a striking feature of my selected business sectors is their sophisticated practice in inter-firm collaboration as well as competition. Such strategic alliances, and their associated partnership competences, are a powerful means by which even good firms try to become outstanding and how the very best then maintain their position by continuous self-improvement. In the business world over half of strategic alliances fail or disappoint. Alliances are inherently 'messy' (de Rond, 2003): there is clearly no one model of what makes a business alliance succeed or fail. Can we in education learn something from their experience, far from complete though it is?[3]

In the first thinkpiece I suggested that partnership competence consists of three core features: co-ordination, communication and bonding. But of course there are other ways of expressing complex collaboration.[4] One is to conceive of an alliance as requiring three critical components: magnets, glue and drivers.

— Magnets refer to the forces, intentions and expected benefits that attract the members into the alliance. Success is more likely if the partnership is entered voluntarily with the determination to gain mutual benefits. The importance of personal chemistry between leaders should not be overlooked. Start with people who are enthusiastic about partnership, who get on with one another and who are determined to deliver results.

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[3] For sources in addition to those mentioned in the main text, see Di Domenico, Rangoon, Winchester, Boojihawon & Mordant (2011); Mankin & Cohen (2004); Reuer (2004); Spekman & Isabella with MacAvoy (2000). For collaboration in the arts, see Farrell (2001). For collaboration with the community, see Huxham (1996).
[4] Beyerlein, Johnson & Beyerlein (2004)

— Glue consists of the factors that keep the partnership together and prevent it from falling apart. When the partnership begins, the glue is strongest at the top. To sustain the partnership over a long period with its inevitable ups and downs, glue is needed lower down. If people are empowered to make decisions with as little bureaucracy as possible, they will learn fast. Much of the glue is about developing a culture in which people enjoy the work of partnership as well as make gains from it. The need for fun in work should not be underestimated.

— Drivers are the factors that leaders insert into the partnership as it evolves to ensure that the focus of collaboration is on learning and the promised benefits of partnership, to support and encourage those who are working on partnership activities, to make mid-course corrections and adaptations, and to propel the partnership forward by introducing new opportunities and challenges. Without drivers, alliances lose focus, drift apart or become complacent.

All three need the active work of leaders, who need to ask themselves, as the partnership develops, whether its state of health needs attention to be given to the magnets, the glue or the drivers.

Towards a maturity model of a self-improving school system

A maturity model of a self-improving school system is a statement of the organisational and professional practices and processes of two or more schools in partnership by which they progressively achieve shared goals, both local and systemic. The model is elaborated for particular application to the lifecycle of a teaching school alliance over the next few years. It also applies to many different kinds of partnership between two or more schools.

Such a maturity model, when fully developed and tested, potentially serves several functions:

— a guide and support to alliances and partnerships "stepping stones" during their development

— a set of metrics by which progress in the forging and sustainability of alliances and partnerships may be judged

— a benchmark by which alliances and partnerships may be compared and contrasted

— a set of success criteria by which policy implementation and outcomes in alliances and partnerships may be judged

In its present form, this is simply a preliminary sketch, within a thinkpiece, of a possible maturity model. At this point it is designed to stimulate discussion and debate (including disagreement) among the first cohort of teaching school alliances and other interested parties. If it commends itself to school leaders, then the National College and the TDA will co-develop the model with practitioners in teaching school alliances as a practical instrument for diagnostic and evaluation purposes. Before then, headteachers should be very wary of using it prematurely as a finished instrument for immediate use.

Many excellent partnerships already flourish and will continue to do so, alongside teaching school alliances. The maturity model may help them to judge the character and quality of what they do and feed aspirations towards even better partnership practice.

In this initial sketch, the maturity model contains three dimensions: professional development, partnership competence and collaborative capital. Each dimension contains four inter-connected strands.

The **professional development** dimension's strands are:

— joint practice development

— talent identification and development through distributed leadership

— mentoring and coaching

— distributed staff information

The **partnership competence** dimension's strands are:

— high social capital

— fit governance

— evaluation and challenge

— distributed system leadership

The **collaborative capital** dimension's strands are:

— analytical investigation

— creative entrepreneurship

— alliance architecture

— disciplined innovation

Each strand has four stages or levels.

— **Beginning**: The alliance or partnership is at an early stage, when thinking and planning are at a premium and negotiations between the leaders of the schools intending to become partners are taking place. Leaders are more active, confident and committed than other organisational members, though first steps may be tentative, made with caution, and perhaps suspicion outside the senior leadership.

— **Developing**: The main foundations of the alliance are now established and the partnership is actively in operation. However, some strands of the dimensions remain under development. Problems and conflicts are experienced and have to be resolved. Other strands have yet to be developed.

— **Embedding**: Policies and practices are being made routine in alliance schools: most strands are at this level. The alliance is moving towards maturity.

— **Leading**: The partnership is mature. It is leading in two senses: first, member schools are helping one another to reach excellence across the board, and thereby amassing experience of how to initiate and maintain new alliances and partnerships; and secondly, it is leading by being at the frontline of innovation. At this stage the partners would expect to be rated by Ofsted as 'outstanding' in partnership.

At any one point, different schools in the partnership will be at different stages. It is assumed that the stringent criteria adopted in the process of designation as teaching schools mean that such schools will, for most of the strands in the first two dimensions, be at least at the embedding stage. It is on this basis that they have achieved the status of nodal schools, some of which have been highly experienced training schools for ITT as well as members of the TDA's continuing professional development (CPD) clusters. However, a school judged as outstanding in student achievement does not necessarily have a matching competence to initiate and sustain a partnership with other schools. Moreover, there will often be substantial differences between teaching schools and their partner(s), some of which may have relatively little previous experience in either ITT and/or cluster-based CPD. When the model is applied to partnerships other than teaching school alliances, none of the partners may have much experience beyond the beginning and developing stages, and they will need to find their own means of identifying a nodal school or risk a leadership failure.

The maturity model: the professional development dimension

Professional development comes first because it is one of the principal ways by which teaching and learning are improved, and so is crucial to system improvement:

'High-performing principals focus more on instructional leadership and developing teachers. They see their biggest challenges as improving teaching and the curriculum, and they believe that their ability to coach others and support their development is the most important skill of a good school leader... they work the same hours as other principals, but spend more time working with the people in their school.'

Barber, Whelan & Clark, 2010: 7

In its present form, the model may be useful to schools for preliminary diagnosis and reflection. Variation in the stages of the model's dimensions is to be expected in all partnerships. The path from beginning to leading zigzags unpredictably, and each movement over time is not necessarily a form of progress. Alliances may use the model to consider what they might do, and when, to attain maturity, but they should not treat it as a rigid sequence of stages to be slavishly followed. In particular, headteachers should be sensitive to what is happening in the alliance not only among the schools' senior leaders but also between middle leaders, who play a critical role in alliance success. Teaching school alliances will develop and modify the new role of SLE accordingly.

Professional development dimension strand 1: joint practice development

Over the last three decades or so, schools in England have been moving from a long-established model of teachers' professional development to a better model.

The older model, which I call the knowledge model of professional development, originally laid strong emphasis on ITT, spent mainly in a higher education (HE) institution studying the formal literature on education ('theory'), with a shorter amount of time in schools ('teaching practice'). Much of the knowledge acquired was tested in formal examinations and written coursework. Practical skills in the classroom were judged by occasional visits and observations by tutors and examiners. Subsequent professional development took the form of occasional and irregular opportunities to attend out-of-school courses, which were designed and delivered by HE staff or local authority advisers, in expert-to-novice mode. In later years, such professional development was offered in training cascaded from a central government source where it was designed and then delivered locally.

During the last 30 years this model has by fits and starts been turned into what I call the practice model of professional development, where the emphasis is less on cognitive change through the acquisition of academic knowledge and more on the progressive development of best professional practice. Its focus is learning-by-doing. Thus the time spent in schools during ITT is increased, sometimes substantially. The length of ITT is reduced and it is assumed that throughout their careers teachers need, and are entitled to, regular opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD). Much of this professional development focuses on, and is even fused with, their professional practice: the object is to improve what teachers do, not merely what they know. Increased knowledge often takes the form of craft know-how rather than book learning. Schools develop their own professional development policies and practices and there is a strong emphasis on in-house design for professional development as well as in-house delivery through peer-to-peer mentoring and coaching as well as teachers' own research.

At present, in my experience, most schools remain poised between these two models, drawing on both but seeking to move further towards the practice model of professional development, whilst reserving some (reduced) space for the knowledge model. Few schools have developed a coherent and integrated approach to professional development from initial training to advanced leadership development. This is a key goal for teaching school alliances.

It will not be enough for teaching schools to continue the drive to the practice model of professional development. Their challenging task is to raise professional development to a new level through the exemplary use and dissemination of joint practice development within a strategic alliance.

Let me explain. Peer-to-peer professional development is often called "sharing good practice". Teachers modestly tell other teachers about a practice they find interesting and that seems to work. Usually this is done orally at a conference or meeting or in writing, perhaps in some kind of database of practice or innovation. The weakness is that sharing practice in this way does not necessarily mean there has been any practice transfer, that is, that the recipient can now do what the donor of the practice has mastered. The more complex the practice to be transferred, the less likely a sharing through oral or written description results in real practice transfer. For this to happen, donor and recipient need to be able to observe one another at work in classrooms and then co-operate in a coaching relationship, whereby the donor offers the recipient advice, support and encouragement.

Most "sharing of good practice" does not amount to practice transfer, unless the practice is very simple. As one of the major means of improving teaching and learning, it is a relative failure. Something more robust is needed. Members of a teaching school alliance should be required not to "share good practice" but to take responsibility for ensuring real practice transfer, and being accountable if the practice is not really transferred. The new world needs more than the good intentions of "sharing good practice", namely the demonstrable movement of practice that improves teaching and learning. As has so often been found in the business world, the best way to move practice is to move those who practise it close to the site to which it is to be moved. Alliances have an enhanced ability to move people within their networks, and they should use it.

When such peer-to-peer sharing takes place it is not a matter of unilateral practice transfer, important as that can be. Rather, through mutual observation and coaching the donor reflects further on the practice that is being shared and explores ways in which it can be improved further. This is a process to which the recipient can also contribute as an act of reciprocity. In short, what begins as sharing practice ends up as a co-construction of practice that entails incremental innovation. This is of fundamental importance to alliance longevity. If over time one of the partners reaches the point of having nothing to offer the other, then alliance demise beckons. If, however, the partners are locked into a process to which both parties contribute, and from which both parties can learn, the alliance thrives.

The term that most accurately describes this process is joint practice development[5], for it captures a process that is truly collaborative, not one-way; the practice is being improved, not just moved from one person or place to another. Joint practice development (JPD) gives birth to innovation and grounds it in the routines of what teachers naturally do. Innovation is fused with and grows out of practice, and when the new practice is demonstrably superior, escape from the poorer practice is expedited.

If JPD replaced sharing good practice in the professional vocabulary of teachers, we would, I believe, see much more effective practice transfer in the spirit of innovation that is at the heart of a self-improving system.

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[5] Fielding, Bragg, Craig, Cunningham, Eraut, Gillinson, Horne, Robinson & Thorn, 2004

Teaching schools need to embed JPD internally and then help all the schools in their alliances to do the same.

A few schools now do this, but it must become the standard form of professional development in all schools. Teachers need sustained time in which to work together on practice development and transfer and it takes imagination to provide this. Schools in the best partnerships make better use of the five professional development days. For instance, they choose a common date for two of the days, so that partner school staff enjoy good-quality time to work together on JPD. On the other three days, one or more schools close and staff spend the day in a partner school that is working normally, allowing teachers to observe and work together on practice development and transfer in a real setting.

JPD in alliances offers yet more. Following Hamel (1991), it is possible to conceptualise a firm as a portfolio of core competences, such as how to manufacture goods or provide services, combined with encompassing disciplines, such as total quality management, just-in-time systems, and customer service. In these terms, a school may be treated as a portfolio of core competences, such as the teaching expertise in how to promote student learning, and as a set of encompassing disciplines, such as the school's policies and practices for student behaviour, distributing leadership, and mentoring and coaching.

It was noted above that in the business world there are three (not mutually exclusive) motives for making a strategic alliance: greater efficiency, competitive advantage and increased learning opportunities. It is the last of these that drives most teachers into alliances. But to realise alliance learning opportunities to the full, teachers have to learn their partners' encompassing disciplines, not just their core competences. This is precisely what JPD provides. It goes beyond "sharing good practice", which is restricted to the sharing of decontextualised core competences, for through the alliance's structures and cultures it contextualises the core competences within their encompassing disciplines which also have to be transferred if the transfer of core competences is to be effective. Table 1 presents a tentative sketch of four stages for this strand.

Table 1: Professional development strand 1 - transferring core competences using JPD

Beginning	Developing	Embedding	Leading
The school encourages staff to share good practice in principle as well as in practice on professional training days and sometimes following attendance at external courses. The knowledge model of professional development remains the natural assumption of many teachers as the accepted form of CPD or in-service training (Inset).	The school has instituted peer observation sessions, encourages coaching and engages in learning walks for staff and students, thus moving steadily towards the practice model of CPD. The school has some experience of involvement in ITT, though it sees itself as very much the junior partner to a university.	The school has evolved its CPD close to the practice model, with regular mutual observation of lessons followed by coaching sessions as part of the school's routine as well as on professional training days with partners. As JPD increases, the knowledge model of professional development is used sparingly, and only when it provides the best professional development for the purpose at hand and can be shared with colleagues. The school is involved in ITT.	The school has a highly sophisticated model of professional development that integrates ITT and CPD into a coherent whole, in which leadership development begins in ITT and progresses to senior leadership roles and succession planning. JPD is embedded and applies across partnerships. Encompassing disciplines are transferred with core competences. Staff are skilled in the design and management of innovation and the school serves as an innovation hub.

The remaining three strands of the professional development dimension are the foundations of joint practice development. Making sure these foundations are firmly in place, as they are in some schools, eases the transition to JPD.

Professional development dimension strand 2: talent identification and development through distributed leadership

Identifying talent is a precondition of high-quality professional development, since this specifies individual needs that professional development is designed to meet. Attracting and selecting those with the right qualities is critical to the overall leadership capacity of the system. To be attracted into leadership, people must be given a chance to taste it. The National College has already provided advice on how to identify talent, with rich case studies on the identification and development of leaders.[6]

Traditionally, leadership in schools was weakly distributed and resided mainly in the headteacher. Over the years in England, more senior staff have been given leadership roles, and associate and assistant headteachers are now common, alongside the more conventional middle leaders. The extension of leadership roles to students is a major new form of leadership distribution. Such distributed leadership is important because it is when people believe they are given real and regular opportunities to exercise leadership that they use their talents to the full and willingly share their knowledge and skill with others, in their own and in a partner school. Without distributed leadership, it is impossible to offer appropriate professional development to those identified with high leadership potential.

Every member of the alliance must be able to answer four questions:

— What are the goals (purposes and outcomes) of the alliance?

— How do the goals of what I do fit with, and help to achieve, these alliance goals?

— How do I exercise leadership to achieve these aligned goals?

— What will I gain, what will the school gain, and what will the partner schools gain?

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[6] See, for example, What we are learning about… identifying talent: an evidence into practice guide (National College, 2009) and Matthews, Higham, Stoll, Brennan & Riley (2011).

Table 2: Professional development stage 2 - talent identification and development through distributed leadership

Beginning	Developing	Embedding	Leading
Most leadership is distributed to senior and middle leaders who have been sent on relevant external courses. Identifying talent among staff is at an early stage and rests with the headteacher in consultation with senior leaders. Those identified are given opportunities to attend relevant external courses. The headteacher has devolved responsibility for this whole area of professional development to a deputy or assistant headteacher.	Leadership opportunities are being extended to all staff. More attention is being given to in-house development of leaders. Potential conflict between goals in the partnership and between individual and organisational goals is being recognised. Identifying talent is put on a systematic basis with regular reviews linked to performance management. Those identified are also given in-house opportunities for leadership.	Goals between and within partners are aligned and goals of individuals and teams are aligned with alliance goals. Leadership is distributed and its development is inherent in all professional development work and closely tied to practice through mentoring and coaching. Student leadership is being cultivated. Talent identification and leadership development are integral to performance management and professional development. The headteacher takes overall responsibility for professional development, devolving the detail to accountable senior leaders. New staff are inducted into the processes of career development that includes talent identification and leadership development.	The importance of goal alignment is understood and applied. Leadership development is integrated into all professional development for staff, who are also offered stretch assignments in partner schools. Leadership development for students is at an advanced stage. Senior staff contribute their experience to external courses on leadership as well as within alliance schools. The school is skilled in talent identification and leadership development and has undertaken work with other schools and partners to develop their own systems. It has produced atypically large numbers of staff who have moved on to senior leadership posts in other schools.

Professional development dimension strand 3: mentoring and coaching

Mentoring and coaching (M&C) naturally follow talent identification and are a key means of nurturing it[7]. M&C are of particular importance in leadership development, since leaders learn best with and from outstanding leaders.

In many schools mentor/mentoring and coach/coaching are seen as essentially a unitary phenomenon in which the two terms are largely synonymous and interchangeable. In a minority of schools the terms are distinctive:

— Mentor is used to describe a person who is not in a line management relationship to the mentee, and to whom the mentee can turn to discuss in confidence personal and professional concerns and problems. The mentor is a more experienced person who has the capacity to listen and empathise, counsel and advise. In classical mythology, Mentor was one of the people to whom Odysseus, going to the war with Troy, entrusted his son Telemachus.

— Coach is used to describe a person who has (had) a skill, who understands its nature, and who is working with others to help them develop and apply that skill. Sports and athletics provide the obvious model for a coach.

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[7] For a useful overview, see Coaching and mentoring: how to develop top talent and achieve stronger performance (Luecke & Ibarra, 2004).

Policies and training for developing the skills of mentors and coaches can be devised for students as well as staff. Students are more likely to become skilful mentors and coaches if the staff are highly visible role models.

Mentoring and coaching between schools are at the heart of effective practice transfer. A school that has not developed a strong M&C culture is not likely to be successful either at moving professional knowledge and skill to alliance partners or at rising to the level of JPD.

Table 3: Professional development strand 3 - mentoring and coaching

Beginning	Developing	Embedding	Leading
There is some M&C among staff but it is unsystematic and driven by enthusiasts.	The school is devising a policy for M&C linked to performance management and leadership development. There is no sharp distinction between mentoring and coaching. There is some M&C among students, but a coherent policy for its development is lacking.	The school has a systematic M&C policy and training as part of its professional practice model of professional development. The distinction between mentors and coaches is made in allocating roles. M&C among students is common, especially with vertical tutoring and the vertical curriculum.	The school contributes to external courses on M&C within professional development and has experience of the use of external mentors and coaches (eg from business and industry) for both staff and students. The school is piloting new approaches to M&C, such as a system of online student-to-student M&C between schools.

Professional development dimension strand 4: distributed staff information

Whilst it is not unusual for schools in partnership to share data about students, sharing equivalent knowledge about staff is more rare. I have asked a number of schools in partnership the following question: "In which of your schools could I find the best teacher of [X]?" The usual reply is ignorance, though sometimes an educated guess is offered. So if the topic is a curriculum subject in a secondary school, the school with the best record in GCSE and A-level results is suggested, but the particular teacher can almost never be named. In a deep partnership, senior leaders have shared knowledge of outstanding teachers to broker the best professional development matches among teachers, which increases trust (Six & Sorge, 2008).

If every alliance could identify its most outstanding teachers in every subject, then they could locate and make known where the truly leading practice is to be found. This happens in medicine: in every teaching hospital each specialist team knows where the leaders in their field are, not just nationally but internationally. Will the same happen in education?

However, teachers judged to be outstanding for their classroom performance are not thereby necessarily well placed to help other teachers to reach the same level. This demands the skills of working with colleagues and serving as a coach. Some people have this skill to a high level even though they are not themselves the best performers. An effective partnership needs to identify the best performers and also those who are best at working with colleagues, for the latter group may have much to teach the former.

Table 4: Professional development strand 4 - distributed staff information

Beginning	Developing	Embedding	Leading
The headteacher and senior leadership team (SLT) know the identity of the best teachers over a range of topics, but this is not collected or reviewed on a systematic basis beyond what comes to light through performance management and Ofsted inspection arrangements.	The headteacher and senior staff collate and review their knowledge of staff qualities, including the capacity to work well with colleagues. This is used in the identification and deployment of mentors and coaches.	Staff data is used to support professional and leadership development and the identification of mentors and coaches. It is assumed that all staff should be supported to develop the skills of both mentors and coaches. A parallel policy for student development is being developed.	Staff data is distributed among alliance partners, who explore ways of maximising the use of such data-sharing without breaching confidentiality or undermining personal integrity. The most outstanding teachers in every subject are identified and used in professional development across the alliance.

The maturity model: the partnership competence dimension

The professional development dimension and its four strands are attributes of individual schools. The strands can be achieved at a high level, and often are, independently of any partnership arrangements. Strategic alliances give the strands added value when they also become partnership attributes. In partnership, each strand assumes a new and much more powerful form as it becomes the common property of the alliance partners. But partnership competence has to be a school attribute before it can become a partnership attribute. Thus partnership competence is a *sine qua non* of the nodal school in any alliance. Without partnership competence, none of the professional development strands can be transformed from school attributes into alliance attributes, and thereby enhanced. In a successful alliance all the schools acquire high levels of partnership competence.

A school may have some of the prerequisites for partnership competence, such as a culture of mentoring and coaching, but it acquires partnership competence only when it draws on these to make a real partnership work. In successful alliances all schools set the acquisition of partnership competence as an alliance goal.

Partnership dimension strand 1: high social capital

At the heart of partnership competence is social capital, which consists of two elements, trust[8] and reciprocity.

Trust is critical in binding a sustainable relationship between partners. Trust has many elements. At its basic level, the partners show goodwill towards one another. Beyond this, partners move to a stage of being more open and honest with one another and building the reliability (consistency, dependability) and the competence that commands respect. Trust is built slowly, especially for leaders, who may have to share fears and anxieties as well as hopes and aspirations about the partnership. Trust is easily fractured when one partner proves to be, or is perceived to be, dishonest, unreliable or incompetent. It is hard to rebuild trust once it has collapsed.

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[8] There is a huge literature on the highly complex concept of trust. See, for example, Nooteboom (2002); O'Neill (2002); Gambetta (1990); Fukuyama (1995); Barber (1983); Luhmann (1979).

The idea of reciprocity is the sense of sharing and obligation to mutual exchange: if I offer you a gift or help, you feel you want to make some kind of return to me. Reciprocity arises when there is some level of trust, perhaps no more than goodwill, but once it takes place it increases the level of trust. Trust and reciprocity are, in short, mutually dependent and in practice reinforce each other in a virtuous circle.

When social capital in an organisation is at a high level, people start to share their intellectual capital, that is, their knowledge, skills and experience: as they trust and respect one another, they do not feel the need to protect their intellectual capital and guard it from others. When people offer to share their knowledge and experience, reciprocity is enhanced along with trust. In other words, as intellectual capital gets shared, social capital rises, and a virtuous circle between intellectual and social capital is stimulated (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; van Wyk, Jansen & Lyles, 2008).

Creating and maintaining social capital in one's own school is a core precondition of successful partnerships and alliances committed to mutual support. It is essential to resolve what many school leaders see as the debilitating tension between competition and collaboration among schools.

Consider this example from the business world.In the USA, two major centres of innovation in the high-tech industries lie on the east and west coasts respectively. In northern California, just south of San Francisco, lies Silicon Valley, where out of the desert and fruit growing has sprung the world's most famous place for high-tech innovation. On the other coast, near Boston, is Route 128, along which is located another set of high-tech firms. Both are rich in intellectual capital: Silicon Valley has Stanford University, and Route 128 has the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Silicon Valley is a household name, but Route 128 means little to most people.

What accounts for the different levels of success when both places were rich in intellectual capital? Saxenian (1994) reports that the Route 128 system:

> 'is based on independent firms that internalise a wide range of productive activities. Practices of secrecy and corporate loyalty govern relations between firms and their customers, suppliers and competitors, reinforcing a regional culture that encourages stability and self-reliance. Corporate hierarchies ensure that authority remains centralised and information tends to flow vertically. The boundaries between and within firms and between firms and local institutions thus remain... distinct in this independent firm-based system.'

Saxenian, 1994: 3

It is very different in Silicon Valley, which has:

> 'a regional network-based industrial system that promotes collective learning and flexible adjustment among specialist producers of a complex of related technologies. The region's dense social networks and open labour markets encourage experimentation and entrepreneurship. Companies compete intensely while at the same time learning from one another about changing markets and technologies through informal communication and collaborative practices; and loosely linked team structures encourage horizontal communication among firm divisions and with outside suppliers and customers. The functional boundaries within firms are porous in a network system, as are the boundaries between firms themselves and between firms and local institutions such as trade associations and universities. '

Saxenian, 1994: 2

Clearly Silicon Valley is social capital rich and Route 128 is social capital poor and the difference is crucial to the level of success of the areas and the firms within them. With its greater social capital, Silicon Valley leapt ahead of Route 128 because it was able to realise its collective intellectual capital.

My question is this: which area reminds you of our traditional school system, Route 128 with its autonomous firms with strong boundaries within and between each firm and its associated institutions, or Silicon Valley with its strong networks, weak boundaries and its collaborative relationships?

Happily in recent years there has been a considerable growth in collaboration of various sorts between schools. Current government policy is encouraging school-to-school support and collaborative professional development and pushing the school system further from Route 128 towards Silicon Valley. This is very much in line with recent international evidence:

'we encountered collaborative practice wherever there are high-performing schools... collaborative practices embed routines of instructional and leadership excellence in the teaching community, making classroom practice public, and develop teachers into coaches of their peers. These practices are, in turn, supported by an infrastructure of professional career pathways that not only enable teachers to chart their individual development course but also help to share their pedagogic skills throughout the system. Collaborative practices shift the drive for improvement away from the centre to the front lines of schools, helping to make it self-sustaining.'

Mourshed, Chijioke & Barber, 2010: 73

Is this a vision to create an educational equivalent to Silicon Valley? If so, then it must be recognised that unless there is considerable investment in social capital, the intellectual capital in forms such as teachers' professional skills in teaching and learning will not in fact be distributed to the full, and the system will be more like Route 128 than Silicon Valley. There will undeniably be some real achievements, but not a world-class transformation.

It is commonly claimed by school leaders that collaboration between schools would increase if only competition between them were to be removed. In the business world, including Silicon Valley, collaboration and competition live side by side. It seems that if the system is rich in social capital, competition does not drive out collaboration but may actively promote it. This is especially so in innovative milieux, which Peter Hall (1998) repeatedly describes as 'highly networked, highly interdependent and yet collaborative'. There was, he says, in every case:

'a local network, which not only supplied highly specialised kinds of skilled labour and services, but also created a climate of innovation in which everyone learned from a dozen competitors; competitor-co-operators would be the best term. Typically such a network comprised many small firms and constituent individuals, sharing a common technical knowledge which became a sort of shared intellectual property.'

Hall, 1998: 494

This is the same point as that made by Saxenian (1994: 2) – 'companies compete intensely while at the same time learning from one another'. The challenge in education is not to abolish competition in the hope that unparalleled levels of collaboration and innovation will be instantly unleashed.

When in Silicon Valley a few years ago, I met senior executives at Hewlett-Packard, one of the most successful of IT companies. I was told that Hewlett-Packard gives most of its knowledge away. This was much to my surprise, since I assumed that the high levels of competition in Silicon Valley would lead firms to protect their knowledge against industrial spies. Yes, it was explained to me patiently, some knowledge is well guarded, especially that behind any product about to come to market. But most other knowledge is given away, since no one company on its own can create all the knowledge that is necessary to be at the leading edge. If a firm gives much knowledge away, its partners will return the favour and everybody benefits, since every firm then owns far more knowledge than it could ever have created by working alone. But for firms to give knowledge away requires high social capital – the culture of trust and reciprocity between strategic alliances and the structure of networked partnerships in which they are enmeshed.

Given that the white paper (HM Government, 2010) claims a parallel between teaching schools and teaching hospitals, an example from my own research with surgeons is perhaps in order (Hargreaves, 1996). Cardio-thoracic surgeons in teaching hospitals are highly competitive, and work hard to improve their reputation above the standing of colleagues in other hospitals. However, when the team in one hospital makes an advance in professional practice, surgeons from other hospitals are welcome to attend and observe operations and the innovation gets transferred. The process starts with competition, but through collaboration and the sharing of professional knowledge, the quality of all cardio-thoracic surgery improves. It is this complex combination of competition and collaboration that the level of professional practice is constantly being raised. Not surprisingly, these surgeons established an exemplary training culture to support their junior doctors. Could not the same thing happen through the work of teaching school alliances?

I have placed social capital at the head of the partnership dimension because of its demonstrable power in forging and sustaining strategic alliances (Coleman, 2010). Alliances in which one partner is seen as in every way superior to others, who in their turn simply have to learn from the partner in the dominant position, have a poor success rate, because this stance destroys the trust that is the seed of social capital. A strong or deep partnership may not be symmetrical in its capacities or qualities, but it is not about domination. It is rather about one partner taking a servant leader role.

A school lacking a reasonably high level of internal trust cannot expect to make a success of partnership with another school. Senior leaders are not always good judges of the levels of trust in their school – between headteacher and staff, between staff and students, and between staff and parents or other stakeholders. In my experience, headteachers tend to overestimate the degree of trust in their schools, and so may need to audit trust levels[9] to check the accuracy of their perceptions.

Building deep trust within one school is a significant challenge for school leaders: building trust across schools is an even tougher challenge for forging a successful strategic alliance. This arises when it is acknowledged that all schools contain some features from which others can learn, when all parties believe they have something to offer to others and something to gain from others. This conviction that schools have complementary strengths allows social capital, in its core of trust and reciprocity, to flourish. In past practice, the high-achieving school has always found that in assisting a low-achieving school it too has reaped many benefits: helping others to acquire your knowledge and skills makes you reflect on your own practice with the potential to enhance it. But complementary strengths have to be sought out, exchanged and built on through JPD. This is at the heart of a self-improving system.

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[9] For trust audits in schools, see Tschannen-Morgan (2004) and Kochanek (2005).

Table 5: Partnership strand 1 - high social capital

Beginning	Developing	Embedding	Leading
There is limited experience of building trust across schools at headteacher and senior leader level in a small number of areas. Goodwill exists from all sides, but is not yet sufficiently open and honest. There is belief among one partner's staff that the partnership is about a one-way transfer of professional knowledge and skill, while among staff of the other partner are anxious they are treated in deficit terms – 'we're being done to'. Governors are wary of partnerships.	Trust, with openness and honesty, has been established at SLT level and is now being established among all other staff across schools. SLTs in all partners believe each partner has something of value to offer. There is action to identify what each partner and member of staff can offer to the other(s) and what might be sought from the other(s). Governors are divided on the benefits of the alliance and work is undertaken to reassure them.	Trust is well established among staff and increasing among governors and key stakeholders. Trust audits take place from time to time. Action to create trust among students across schools has begun. Reciprocity in action exists at all levels, including students, with high levels of satisfaction at mutual gains. There is movement from knowledge transfer to JPD. 'Partners do things with each other, not to each other'. Governors support the alliance.	High levels of trust are now well established and at each level there is sufficient confidence and experience to advise and support other partnerships in the art of establishing and sustaining trust. Success in effective reciprocity is validated and quality assured externally. Staff have experience of supporting other schools in to establish the principle of reciprocity, and operate it in practice to improve teaching and learning.

Partnership dimension strand 2: fit governance

Headteachers are heavily involved as an alliance is established: the personal chemistry between them may be the strong initial magnet. But to be effective and enduring, alliances need much more than good relations at the top. Some form of fit governance is needed, not merely to set the ground rules but to ensure that the magnets and glue at other levels are in place. Fit governance means getting the agreement of as many people as possible to the alliance and its purposes as well as commitment to its ways of working.

There are now huge structural differences in the English school system, with at one end so-called hard federations and chains (arranged or shotgun marriages between schools, with no possibility of divorce), and at the other, much looser forms of occasional and restricted partnerships (marriages of convenience and love matches, with a divorce option). Local authorities increasingly play the role of marriage brokers and counsellors. Governance arrangements need to reflect these differences to be fit for purpose. In the business world, alliance governance[10] is about the disciplined procedures for forming, managing and monitoring partnerships, including key issues such as decision-making procedures. Fit governance starts from being very clear about the purposes of the alliance, the benefits that will flow from it, and the ways in which those purposes will be achieved and evaluated. It answers four key questions (de Rond, 2003):
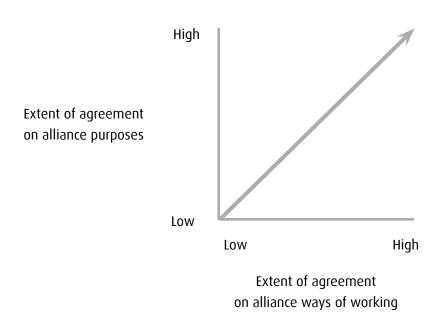
— Who is involved (social make-up)?

— Why the alliance exists (strategic rationale)?

— What is being done (activities)?

— How this is being done (operating rules)?

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[10] See, for example, Reuer, Devarakonda & Klijn (2010); Steinhilber (2008); Gulati (2007); Lorange & Roos (1992).

A transparent strategy and business plan also covers: what resources are available and how they will be shared; the powers of liaison and implementation teams; communications; early warning systems of trouble; methods of conflict resolution; and how to end a partnership. Account needs to be taken, however, of the fact that aims, priorities and expected outcomes may well change over time because of unanticipated developments and/or an unstable external environment.

Governance should be established before problems arise, not as a means of solving them in times of conflict and crisis. So early on headteachers can audit their schools' alliance readiness by means of the alliance agreement matrix (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Alliance agreement matrix

Source: Christensen et al, 2006 (adapted)

In Figure 1, the further up the diagonal one can get before plunging into the alliance, the more fit the governance.

Governance arrangements in school partnerships vary from a formal and legal contract, with bureaucratic (and even counterproductive) consequences, to an informal arrangement with more flexibility, but risks of misunderstanding and conflict. But all types of strategic alliance should recognise that the quality of their governance affects the success of the alliance. In practice, teaching school alliances will need governance arrangements that deal with several partnerships of different kinds – with other schools, with a university, with a local authority, and so on. In each case, the headteacher and chair of governors need to ask two key questions:

— How tight do we want our ties to be to this partner, and why?

— How formal does our partnership need to be, and why?

Where a school has relevant prior experience or has already established high levels of trust with a partner, the need for formality in governance arrangements may be reduced. Many teaching schools have already learnt such lessons through existing partnerships.

Usually, the partnership is strongest at headteacher level, where initial decisions on the selection, scope and scale of partnership activities are made. Selection involves the choice of who to involve in partnership activities, especially at the early stage when it is important to choose the right people (eg complementary skills) with the right chemistry (eg, trust) to make an effective partnership (Shah & Swaminathan, 2008); and it involves the choice of the areas or topics for the partnership activity, especially at the early stage when some early demonstrable benefits need to be achieved. Scope is concerned with the detailed content of partnership activities, including judgements about the priorities and potential benefits. Scale brings selection and scope together to specify how many people are to be involved in how much action over what timeframe.

As partnership decisions are extended to less senior staff, they too have to learn how to make sound judgements on the three Ss of partnership activities selection, scope and scale. It takes time to extend partnerships to all levels, particularly student level.

Partnerships have evident benefits, but also costs - often called transaction costs - the time, energy and resources necessary to keep the partnership alive and well. Transaction costs may exceed the benefits, for instance, because the goals of the partnership have become clouded, or because so much energy is being consumed by the partnership that some of the school's valued activities are jeopardised. Under these conditions the partnership may no longer be worth the effort. Selection, scope and scale in early partnership activities should ideally have large benefits for low transaction costs, a difficult but necessary judgement for a headteacher.

I count myself among those who are convinced that our present governance arrangements for schools are no longer fit for purpose. They will become less and less fit as the system moves to the new organisational form of alliances and partnerships. Before long we shall need instruments to audit governance that are equivalent to those devised for businesses. (Nooteboom, 1999)

Table 6: Partnership strand 2 - fit governance

Beginning	Developing	Embedding	Leading
The partnership covers a small range of issues, and this is mainly decided by the headteachers, who meet to discuss them regularly. There is insufficient attention to the three Ss of partnership and to ensuring net benefits. Some staff, as well as some governors, are sceptical about alliance benefits.	Senior staff acquire greater skill in ensuring the various governance elements are taken into account in the planning and monitored implementation of partnership activities. Governors see the first set of benefits from alliance activities.	Most staff understand the concept of fit governance, so the partnership is now extensive in scope and involves many staff and students. The focus of partnership activities varies according to changing priorities. Staff are skilled in using the three Ss of partnership and in assessing the benefits and transaction costs of partnership. Governors are now alliance enthusiasts.	Ensuring fit governance is standard procedure for establishing different partnerships. Alliance partners are also fully experienced in judging the three Ss of partnership. Particular emphasis is placed on the impact of partnership activities on the improvement of teaching and learning.

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Partnership dimension: strand 3 evaluation and challenge

It is relatively easy to monitor and evaluate the value of a partnership when most of what is involved in the partnership is at, or under the control of, relationships between headteachers and senior staff. As more staff and students get involved outside the close supervision and surveillance of senior leaders, as they must in the most effective partnerships, the harder it is to monitor and evaluate the activities unless all involved in the partnership understand and engage in the processes of monitoring and evaluation.

Schools have in recent years become more sophisticated in self-evaluation, and the removal of this element from the Ofsted process should not entail a loss of the relevant skills. Indeed, partnership competence now needs to be part of school self-evaluation. It is not yet common for schools to share their self-evaluations with, and have their validity judged by, another school or a credible and qualified independent person, except Ofsted or a SIP (school improvement partner now abolished). Developing the means to monitor and evaluate partnership is crucial: the TDA's self-assessment framework for professional development should help.

A cost-benefit analysis of the partnership makes better sense if the partners share the whole of their self-evaluations, not just partnership processes and outcomes. Alliance schools have to validate one another's self-evaluations in order to know where to focus partnership activities. At the same time, these self-evaluations have to be tested against the judgements of appropriate external bodies or persons. When the system as a whole reaches maturity, Ofsted is not so much **the** judge of a school's quality, but one means by which the alliance members validate and align the standards by which they make judgements about themselves. As Ofsted moves from quality control to quality assurance, it helps teaching school alliances to quality assure partnership activities. It then becomes easier for the alliance to make itself collectively accountable to the partner schools' stakeholders and communities of interest, who need to understand the outcomes of partnership that are masked by current accountability systems.

Schools in England are used to being challenged by those who hold power over them: ministers and officials from the Department for Education, Ofsted and inspectors, the local authority and its elected members and officers. Among a group of self-improving schools in partnership, the power structure is less evident and so there is a risk that challenge is reduced, or even retracted, as people fear that it will cause offence and undermine the relationship. Why should schools in voluntary alliances challenge one another when they think of themselves as equals? If one partner challenges another, and in particular if the headteacher of one school challenges the headteacher of another, is this not to usurp an unwarranted position of dominance that could imperil the partnership?

There is an alternative to challenge-through-power and it is a challenge that is grounded in high levels of social capital. If you know that someone trusts you, you are able to challenge and constructively criticise that person because it is recognised that you are doing so for that person's good. The deeper the trust, the less the challenge provokes defensiveness and denial, which are common responses to challenge in low-trust relationships. When high social capital obtains, the assumption is that challenge will be reciprocal. In fact, reciprocal challenge can reinforce the trust on which it depends, for it is an expression of the concern of each partner to foster the development and success of the other.

However, the acceptability of challenge needs to be explicitly negotiated. As Hughes and Weiss (2007) point out, in the business world

> 'two companies may agree that a good relationship is characterised by mutual trust and respect for each other's strengths. But unspoken assumptions about what that means in practice may differ sharply. One partner may think that acting with trust and respect means being direct and challenging decisions that seem not to make sense. The other may think that it means each side will defer to the partner's judgment when the partner says it can't do something. Such assumptions lie in wait ready to sabotage the relationship.'

Hughes & Weiss, 2007: 123

Table 7: Partnership strand 3 - evaluation and challenge

Beginning	Developing	Embedding	Leading
As the extent of the partnership is limited and under the close control of the headteacher and senior leaders, the need for processes of monitoring and evaluation is limited. The partners do not see challenge as part of the partnerships and so do not challenge one another at any level.	The ability to judge the benefits of partnership activities and calculate transaction costs is being developed among senior staff as appropriate processes of monitoring and evaluation are devised. As the social capital between the schools' headteachers grows, they begin, somewhat tentatively, to challenge one another and enjoy the benefits.	The skills of monitoring and evaluation of partnership activities is well distributed among staff, as is the skill of maximising benefits whilst minimising transaction costs. Reciprocal challenge is firmly established among senior leaders, and is now being developed at all levels of staff and the student body as social capital is steadily increased.	The partnership has built the skills of monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance of partnership activities into all its leadership development activities and is using this experience to support other schools and partners. Reciprocal challenge is treated as a key feature of a self-improving partnership and is built into all leadership and professional development.

Partnership dimension strand 4: distributed system leadership

The idea of system leadership has mainly been used in England to explain the role of national and local leaders of education (NLEs and LLEs respectively) who have an exemplary reputation as school leaders and are willing to spend time working with and in another school that is seriously underachieving and/or in difficulties. The essence of system leadership is that such a leader is committed to the success of all schools and their students, not just the leader's own, and is willing to act on that commitment by working with others so that the whole system benefits. A self-improving school system requires that all leaders in the school system adopt the philosophy and practice of system leadership.

In a self-improving system, the principles and practice of system leadership, like all leadership, have to be widely distributed through strategic alliances.

Let me explain why I believe this to be a difficult but supremely important step. Teachers commonly invoke the idea of moral purpose to explain what they do and why, but the idea applies to the students in one's own school. As long as teachers accept such a restriction on this moral imperative, they naturally fight ruthlessly to be the most successful school - and top of a league table - in the locality. A perfectly natural question is: why collaborate if the result is to weaken our school's market (ie league table) position?

A challenge for teaching school alliances is for everyone involved, not just the headteachers, to move beyond striving for the success of one's own school to a moral imperative to work for the success of every student in every school in the alliance. This is not just an abstract commitment. It comes about when teachers and students move, however briefly, between schools in partnership, for it is when teachers have direct contact with students from another school that they experience the moral commitment to their success.

Distributed system leadership fundamentally changes the nature of competition within the alliance. Once system leadership is widely distributed, inter-school collaboration is the inevitable consequence of their moral stance. The natural question becomes: How can I do other than collaborate to achieve our moral purpose? The legitimate ambition for the success of one's own school now blends with a commitment to do all one can to raise the achievement of other schools. Competition becomes healthy, because its core purpose and outcome is for all participants to get better at what they do. Healthy competition displaces the old cut-throat competition, under which one's own school got better at the expense of other schools. Is there a parallel here with Silicon Valley? Yes indeed, but in Silicon Valley the altruism of firms towards one another's success was a pragmatic move to boost the industry as a whole. The inter-school altruism motivated by distributed system leadership has a deeply moral base, and this difference is important.

How far can distributed system leadership be extended? When staff see themselves as system leaders, they transmit to students this commitment to partnership. In many schools, students readily support their fellow students on the road to success. When also committed to system leadership, they help one another across schools. It may, however, be difficult to persuade others to commit to system leadership. Leaders of teaching school alliances need to devise distinctive strategies for convincing the following groups that they should embrace the philosophy and practice of distributed system leadership: (i) staff, (ii) governors, (iii) parents and (iv) students.

As system leadership is distributed within alliances, and the number of such alliances increases, a nationwide commitment to distributed system leadership is progressively built. The moral imperative to work for the success of every student permeates the whole school system in England and the moral foundations of a self-improving system are firmly established.

Table 8: Partnership strand 4 - distributed system leadership

Beginning	Developing	Embedding	Leading
As the school enters into partnership with other schools, there is a growing commitment to care about the success of partners and the achievement of their students.	The headteachers and senior staff have accepted the philosophy and practice of system leadership and are now taking action to distribute the ideas of system leadership to other levels in the school.	System leadership is now well developed among the whole staff and action is being taken to extend it to students. Progress is being made in transferring the philosophy of system leadership to partner schools, as the nodal school's SLEs work with peers in alliance schools.	The principles and practice of system leadership are fully distributed within partner schools. The alliance has the collective capacity to induct other partnerships in the art of distributing system leadership.

The maturity model the collaborative capital dimension

Teaching schools, as the nodal schools in any strategic alliance, will be at, or should soon reach, the leadership level in each of the strands of the first two dimensions. They should be able to reach maturity quite quickly and then help other partners to reach this level too. I believe, however, that this will not be enough to achieve a Silicon Valley effect on England's schools.

When schools have attained high levels of partnership competence in a school system (a nation) or a sub-system (a region, local authority or chain/federation), the potential of that system for self-improvement is poised to move to a higher plane. I shall call this new level collaborative capital,[11] and treat it as the third dimension in the maturity model. It is an attribute and asset of the system, not of a school or a partnership. It describes a state where strategic alliances between schools are commonplace, where collaboration-cum-competition is the normal and natural way in which the system operates, and the principles and practice of system leadership are widely shared. In a system with collaborative capital, the power of the schools' social capital to support the sharing of intellectual capital and to generate new intellectual capital increases sharply. The system evolves a new system capacity: the knowledge and skills of collaboration in alliances accumulate to create a new form of capital.

A self-improving system needs many more schools that are rich in collaborative capital, not just partnership competence. It doesn't need just more very good individual schools: it needs a system and sub-systems with high collaborative capital. This is why strategic alliances, the new organisational form that is the basic unit of a self-improving system, are so important.

Collaborative capital has four strands. It is too early to offer stages for the strands in this dimension: devising them is a task for the first cohort of teaching schools.

Collaborative capital dimension strand 1: analytical investigation

In alliances with collaborative capital, the headteachers of nodal schools have a remarkable dual ability. The first is to make a rapid and comprehensive diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses of schools as organisations. To do so they have to be rigorous, even ruthless, investigators who see through the defences and subterfuges by which weaknesses are ubiquitously hidden from detection. This ability is initially grounded in making such a diagnosis of their own school. The second ability is to put quickly in place an organisational strategy that builds on the strengths and removes the weaknesses. This dual ability is used for a partner school, for which the processes of school improvement are then rapidly mobilised through partnership competence and other means.

Analytical investigators possess in abundance what have been called deep smarts (Leonard & Swap, 2005), which are:

'the stuff that produces that mysterious quality, good judgment. Those who have deep smarts can see the whole picture and yet zoom in on a specific problem others haven't been able to diagnose. Almost intuitively, they can make the right decision, at the right level, with the right people... their insight is based more on know-how than on facts; it comprises a system view as well as expertise in individual areas.'

Leonard & Swap, 2005: 9

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[11] The term is here used in a slightly different way from that in much of the business literature. See, for example, Beyerlein et al (2004) and Beyerlein, Beyerlein & Kennedy (2005).

The headteachers of teaching schools need to be analytical, even forensic, investigators, since without the ability to take a dispassionate and objective bird's-eye view they cannot adequately monitor how the alliance is faring and decide which interventions are needed to keep on track.

Collaborative capital dimension strand 2: creative entrepreneurship

The history of school partnership ventures in England is littered with projects that were well-funded and enjoyed some success, but when the funding ran out, much of what had been achieved was lost and the position mostly reverted to the *status quo ante*. Schools find it difficult to treat such funding as no more than start-up help. Teaching school alliances need the skills of generating financial and other kinds of support, with a sound business plan, to ensure that the alliance is adequately resourced on a long-term basis. The original alliances will come to an end, but in my view alliance-building should not, and it is this that will need some constant resource. The raising of funds to support the alliance and the readiness to challenge conventional ways of running schools and partnerships to increase efficiency and effectiveness are critical strands of collaborative capital.

Collaborative capital dimension strand 3: alliance architecture

The teaching schools take the lead as the main architects of alliances. Over time, they:

— bring the partners in their alliance to the same level in professional development and partnership competence

— help their initial partners, as they reach maturity, to establish their own alliances

— use their accumulated partnership competence to start a fresh alliance

— train new alliances in partnership competence through the joint professional development provided by the network

— establish effective online alliances that transcend boundaries of time and space, and in particular international alliances of schools

— specify success criteria by which alliance success and effectiveness may be judged

Teaching school alliances, in short, take the lead in building the architecture of a self-improving school system. To this end, they must help to create more headteachers with the capacity to be nodal leaders. There are groups of schools that want to enter into collaborative partnerships, but none of their current headteachers has the necessary partnership competence to be accepted and serve as the nodal school, with the result that the alliance stalls or fails simply for lack of the necessary help and support. Here the National College has an important role to play.

Collaborative capital dimension strand 4: disciplined innovation

Khanna et al (1998) make a helpful distinction between private and common benefits of partnership. Private benefits are those that accrue to one partner by transfer from another: if partner strengths are complementary this can be done reciprocally. This works well as long as all partners continue to gain some private benefits. But private benefits don't create new knowledge and better professional practices. The critical step of moving from conventional CPD to JPD is that the emerging new practices yield common benefits that are then available to all.

Business guru Rosabeth Moss Kanter notes that:

'alliances that both partners ultimately deem successful involve **collaboration** (creating new value together) rather than mere **exchange** (getting something back for what you put in).'

Kanter, 2002: 100

The move is from what has been called 'sharing-exchanging' to 'sharing-exploring' (Huxham & Hibbert, 2008). This is the expected trajectory within a teaching school alliance: start with the exchange of private benefits by exchanging complementary strengths, building morale and social capital through the demonstration that all partners have something to contribute and that there is a pay-off for everybody. It is then possible to advance to more sustained JPD by synthesising what is now a shared professional knowledge-base to generate the common benefits of innovation. This is the right path, but it is innovation in a relatively slow lane.

The teaching schools themselves, however, have their own national network. This network allows them to exchange expertise at an exceptionally high level: teaching schools can gain some private benefits by joint practice development at the highest level. The network drives the system forward in a way that is not possible if each alliance works in isolation, for it enables the teaching schools collaboratively to devise, test and implement better teaching and learning, which can then be fed back into the partner schools of their alliances. This is more systematic and ambitious innovation than is possible within alliances. It is about generating common benefits at the leading edge of innovation for the benefit of the wider system. The teaching schools network is innovation in the fast lane.

The network thus manages more disciplined innovation (Hargreaves, 2003) than is possible in either the single school or the individual strategic alliance. The network could choose to:

— undertake an ambitious programme of innovation on a set of priority topics or themes agreed by teaching school members

— build an evidence-base of better practice for use in the professional development it provides and makes available to other schools

— offer related professional development in the form of courses and booklets available through the network's programme

These four stands of collaborative capital are the ingredients that turn the concept of teaching schools and their strategic alliances from a small-scale, new organisational form into a reconfigured school system in England. It is the key to scaling up, and making the transition from prototype teaching school alliances to a self-improving school system.

Conclusion

Teaching schools have a double challenge, one local and one national.

The local challenge is to be exemplars of how to co-develop professional practice that raises standards across an alliance. This requires the headteachers to confront head-on the challenge of how to arrive at a healthy competition, one that can be combined with the collaboration that drives the co-evolution of the partner schools to alliance success. Only with the right ingredients, namely high social capital, joint practice development and distributed system leadership, do you get the combination in which competition is healthy. Only then will the strategic alliances expand local capacity. And all this has to be accomplished within unstable local environments as local authorities react, often in very different ways, to the changes introduced by the 2010 white paper.[12]

The national challenge is for teaching schools to work with one another, as a form of distributed intelligence, to co-develop innovations that set new standards of professional practice, thus moving the whole system to a new plane. The alliances should not be islands of excellence, a small-scale initiative that is irrelevant to most schools. If the whole is to add up to more than the sum of the parts, the proposed network of teaching schools must be an ambitious venture aimed directly at generating a huge increase in system capacity. There have been various schemes to create innovation networks in education over recent years, some of which have been substantial and heavily funded. All have, in my view, fallen far short of their ambitions and promises. They have done valuable work with parochial impact, but have not transformed the school system. Can the alliance network break the mould and prove that innovation networks in education can make the genuine breakthroughs of their equivalents in business and industry?

In short, will the teaching schools network help all the alliances to meet both the local and the national challenges and so finally make the difference at the system level?

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[12] A third thinkpiece in this series, to be published in 2012, will report on the importance and impact of these differences.

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