NCSL National College for School Leadership

Research Associate Report

Paul Lawrence, Deputy Principal, Comberton Village College

The strength of weak school ties

The importance of 'weak' relationships in sharing good practice between schools

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Introduction

> "It is one of life's great ironies: schools are in the business of teaching and learning, yet they are terrible at learning from each other. If they ever discover how to do this, their future is assured." (Fullan, 2001 p 92)

The above quote will strike a chord with many school leaders. It neatly summarises both the possible rewards and the potential frustrations of schools working together in order to bring about school improvement. Indeed, it is a quote that the National College for School Leadership has itself used as a lead-in to several publications. It is particularly pertinent in that it anticipates one of the major thrusts of government education policy in recent years.

How schools might best learn from each other is a question that no school leader can afford to ignore. As a deputy principal in a large 11–16 comprehensive, I have inevitably been involved in numerous school improvement projects that have, at their core, the presumption that practice that is effective in one school can contribute to the improvement of practice in another. This has reflected a plethora of government initiatives built around collaboration, partnership and networking. There has been a constant refrain that we must learn from the good or best practice that resides in schools nationwide, and by doing this we will avoid reinventing the wheel. My personal experience has included working in Beacon and Leading Edge partnerships, across the family of schools clustered around our lead specialism and across a Networked Learning Community. Other school leaders will have had similar experiences through Excellence in Cities clusters, Education Action Zones and soft or hard federations.

Yet, however much we might aspire to David Hargreaves's inspirational vision of practitioners "thinking laterally" and creating an "open-source" educational culture (2003), we often find our efforts frustrated by what has been described as the "stickiness" of knowledge (Szulanski, 2003). It has been a common experience of school leaders to find that the process of learning from each other has not been as easy as the rhetoric has sometimes suggested.

The more research that can be undertaken and disseminated about what actually happens when schools try to learn from each other, the better prepared school leaders will be in their improvement efforts. I have, therefore, been keen to investigate what sort of practice schools transfer, what channels they use, what happens to the practice when it has been transferred and, most importantly, the types of relationships schools build with each other. The findings reported here reflect evidence drawn from the first-stage interviews in a range of partnership case studies that I am investigating for an EdD at The University of Nottingham. As such, they are only interim conclusions that I hope to investigate further as my research develops. However, I hope they will be useful to anyone undertaking or planning partnership work with other schools.

Literature review

The idea that the transfer of knowledge or practice within or across institutions could be important did not, of course, originate with schools. It was in the field of business organisation that both business leaders and researchers initially identified that organisations could gain a competitive advantage if their most effective pockets of practice could be adopted across the whole organisation. This led to the development of the field of study known as knowledge management, which has a clear focus on trying to find the best ways of identifying and spreading effective practice. For examples, see O'Dell and Grayson (1998), and Dixon (2000).

The knowledge management literature has raised a number of key questions about the transfer of practice:
- When should organisations aim to copy practice exactly (replication), as in the example of a fast-food chain opening new outlets, and when should they expect that the practice needs to be significantly adapted for a new context?
- Does this depend on the type of knowledge associated with the practice in question? Is it important whether the practice relies on a high degree of tacit knowledge, which is hard to articulate (Polyani, 1963), or explicit knowledge, which can easily be codified in handbooks, manuals and blueprints?
- What are the most effective channels for transferring practice? Should we always rely on relational channels involving face-to-face meetings, or can practice be transferred as easily through non-relational channels, for example, by exploiting new technologies such as websites and email?
- What types of relationship between participants best facilitate the transfer of practice? Do relationships need to be 'strong-tie' ones, relying on close and repeated contact, or can practice be transferred through more tenuous or transient 'weak-tie' relationships?

In recent years, research that has attempted to investigate what happens when schools, in particular, try to share practice with each other has suggested some tentative answers to these questions. The emerging consensus seems to be that due to the high degree of tacitness involved in most educational practice (teachers find it notoriously hard to articulate what they do), and due to the fact that teachers are predominantly 'people people,' the most productive types of relationship are those that are built up over time, that allow the development of trust, and that exploit and enhance close relationships through regular face-to face contact. Thus, Wohlstetter et al (2003) argue for the importance of "high-involvement networks", Fielding et al (2005) conclude that effective collaborative enterprise is dependent on the creation of the time-space for "joint practice development", and McGregor et al (2006) emphasise the merits of "enquiry networks" sustaining ongoing dialogue between participants.

In other words, although it has never been explicitly articulated in these terms, recent research has pointed to strong-tie relationships as the most productive environment for collaborative activity over practice. The strength of a tie has been described as depending on a range of factors including:
- the intensity and intimacy of the relationship
- its duration, and the frequency of contact between partners
- its operation on different levels and about different subjects
- its reciprocity, and the homogeneity of the partners
- its exploitation of existing contacts and issues of geographical proximity (Marsden and Campbell, 1984)

The emphasis in recent studies in schools on close, reciprocal relationships between institutions, which give time and space to allow for the development of practice,

underpinned by the slow evolution of trust, have been mirrored within other practitioner inquiries (Haeusler, 2003) and in the practical advice given to schools embarking on collaborative initiatives (Burns, 2003). There, therefore, seems little room for doubt that where such relationships are able to flourish they can yield important results in terms of practice development that helps develop the capacity of those involved.

Yet Mark Granovetter (1973), who first coined the tie-strength concept, pointed out that in many circumstances weak ties have their advantages. Is there a danger that by concentrating exclusively on such strong-tie relationships, we might ignore other opportunities to transfer practice that might emerge through different types of partnership work?

Research context and methods

The context for this research was the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust's Raising Achievement and Transforming Learning (RATL) project. One important strand of this project was to link specialist schools looking to improve ('project schools') with high-achieving specialist schools ('mentor schools'), for the purpose of inter-school learning. The project has been extremely successful. Andy Hargreaves and his evaluation team (2006) have described it as "one of the most distinctive, promising and successfully impactful reform models to emerge in the recent history of educational change". The DfES now allows high-performing specialist schools to choose to become RATL mentor schools when redesignating their specialist status.

The project seemed particularly suitable as a context for the research, since the espoused rationale of the RATL organisation was that project schools would have the autonomy and the resources to select and establish the kind of relationship they found most effective with the schools they identified as most appropriate to their needs. I envisaged a range of different types of relationship focused on different elements of practice emerging from the research.

For this study, I identified four RATL project 'mentor schools' and asked them to nominate two partner schools each, with which they had worked during the project. All the schools and individual participants are referred to here using pseudonyms. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the RATL co-ordinator in each of the mentor schools, and with the person who had been most closely involved with the transfer process in each project school. I also interviewed a second practitioner in each of the project schools who may not have had any direct interaction with the transfer process, but who would have some involvement in the implementation of the practice in the new context. I therefore investigated 8 partnerships across 12 schools, conducting 20 interviews. I also studied some of the written material produced by the schools regarding the transfer process itself, and the policy and practice documents that described the practices under focus in the mentor school, and as they developed in the project school.

Findings

The predominance of weak ties in RATL relationships

In terms of closeness (that is, a measure of the intensity of the relationship), the interviews provide strong evidence that participants, whether in mentor or project schools, believe they have not developed particularly close or intense relationships with the partners with which they have worked. Certainly, closeness and intensity are particularly subjective concepts and are not open to the straightforward calibration of other dimensions of tie strength, such as geographical distance. Yet, of the 20 interviewees in the sample, not one expressed sentiments that could easily be construed as a perception that their institution had developed close or intense relationships through the RATL project, either for institutions as a collective entity, or for individuals within them. Closeness and intensity are concepts that are most easily articulated in relative terms, and staff from all of the 12 institutions in the study were able to contrast their RATL relationships with at least one relationship they felt was closer – for example, Leading Edge partnerships, local consortia or loose confederations. A deputy headteacher at a project school in a market town reflected on how, in her experience, RATL relationships were different from these:

> "We don't form the same attachment because we don't need to, and so from my perspective, we just gain from the contact, the things that you need. And I think we are in a world now, where people are out for getting the things that will support them, and it's not at the expense of the partner. But I think partners recognise that you're just out for a particular purpose, and there's no need for that kind of intensity of relationship."

In terms of the temporal dimensions of tie strength (duration of relationship and frequency of contact), each of the relationships investigated showed few signs of lasting more than a short duration, whilst there was a low frequency of meeting while the relationships were ongoing. Of course, this judgement cannot be made solely from the perspective of the first interview stage, as it is entirely possible that the seeds sown during initial contact could grow into something with more staying power in the future. However, it can be conclusively stated that there is little evidence to suggest this will be the most likely outcome at this point.

In every case investigated the relationship centred on one major transfer event which took place over the course of one day. In one case, a meeting at some point in the future was thought at least possible, but this was dependent on future developments. In another case, a repeat of the event was planned for a different audience within the school. In three cases, the initial event resulted in follow-up emails from the project schools requesting further information, two of which did not bring about the required result in terms of a response from the mentor school. In each of these cases, the recipient schools expressed regret that this was the case, but in no way did they see this as having impacted greatly on the success of the transfer activity. In the remaining three cases, there was an acknowledgement that the mentor school would be open to further contact, but that this would probably not be necessary. Interviewees said they did not feel the lack of follow-up was detrimental to the success of the transfer:

> "I don't think it matters for that. Because I think we got it and understood how you do it, and we're going to do it ourselves. So, no, I don't think we needed any particular follow-up. I know that we could contact them if we wanted to and ask for some support, because they were extremely good. But I don't have an issue about that." (Deputy headteacher, dormitory town project school)

The factors relating to the structural dynamics of the exchange process (the multiplexity and the reciprocity of the relationship) again suggest that the

partnerships in question can, most appropriately, be categorised as weak-tie relationships. Although single-level and single-focus relationships are not necessarily weak, relationships that are multiplex – that is, that are constituted on a variety of different levels and around the transmission of multiple messages – are likely to be strong. Thus schools that have a relationship that includes links between the headteachers, senior managers, heads of department and across teaching staff in different subject areas might well be described as having a strong-tie relationship. Similarly, in terms of reciprocity, schools that are learning from each other in the mutual exchange of practice might be considered as having a stronger tie strength than a relationship in which the flow of practice is all one-way.

Superficially, the question of multiplexity could appear to suggest varying tie strengths amongst the partnerships in the sample, particularly when reduced to the question of participant numbers in the process. Three out of the eight relationships involved only one member of staff (in each case, a senior manager) from the project school. In one further relationship, a senior manager was joined by a middle manager for the same transfer event. One partnership saw the principal and a middle manager working with the same mentor school on different themes at different times in separate one-off events. Two partnerships saw a representative from the mentor school lead training for a range of senior and middle managers from the project school on one theme, each as a one-off event. In the final partnership, eight members of staff (including senior and middle managers alongside colleagues without management responsibility) from a project school visited a mentor school to investigate two identified issues of potential significant change.

Although the number of staff involved in the processes varied widely, the extent to which any could be said to be truly multi-levelled and multi-themed is questionable. Where the numbers increased, it appears it was not for the purpose of gaining the benefits of creating complex or multiplex relationships, but in order to reach a range of staff simultaneously with the same message or to expose them to the issues surrounding a small number of themes. When considered along with the temporal factors described above, it is hard to interpret this as indicative of strengthening ties.

In terms of reciprocity, eight interviewees felt that in a best-case scenario a relationship would have a clear mutual impact on each of the participating institutions. However, six of these acknowledged that this has not been possible within the context of their RATL relationships and that the ensuing exchange, although more one-way than they would have liked, had still been a positive and constructive experience, as the quotation below suggests:

> "I think, ideally, you always want things to be reciprocal, though I don't think there's any issue in the short term if things are relatively all one-way. It depends what schools are giving and what schools are taking, I suppose… I think the more mutual work that does go on side by side, the better. But there may be times when one organisation needs to take the lead a little bit further than the other, for whatever reason." (Deputy headteacher, dormitory town project school)

The remaining interviewees, however, were categorical about the potential for a constructive relationship, even when it was entirely one-way. A deputy at a semi-rural project school, summarised this succinctly:

> "I don't think our partner perceived it as a problem that they didn't get much from us because I believe that both sides were very clear about what was the nature of this relationship. And it was us taking things from them."

Tie-strength studies have explored the assumption that it is more likely that you will be involved in a close-tie relationship with a neighbour than with someone who is not.

Given that Marsden and Campbell (1984) are prepared to classify all the inhabitants of a 20,000-strong town as neighbours, it seems appropriate in institutional terms to broaden this categorisation to include a wider question of geographical proximity. It seems intuitive that a close geographical distance between institutions will, at least, make it more likely that schools will be able to sustain a strong-tie relationship. This point was acknowledged explicitly by staff from five schools in the case studies.

However, while all things are relative, an analysis of data about the research schools suggests that RATL partner schools are not generally geographically close. The average distance between the partners in the study is 90.5 miles. When the partnership with the longest distance between partner schools is removed from the equation (as this partnership was included specifically because of its geographical distance), the average distance falls to 70.4 miles. It is clear that immediate accessibility is not a key factor in the construction of RATL partnerships, and this, in turn, at least theoretically diminishes the potential for strong-tie relationships developing. Only one of the partnerships was within the same geographical county; none of them was in the same administrative local authority for the purposes of educational organisation.

Marsden and Campbell (1984) talk about the prospect that individuals who know each other through existing social circles are likely to have a stronger tie relationship. Again, we can widen this to suggest that, for our purposes, partnerships that build on any pre-existing ties are potentially more likely to develop effective partnerships. This is a hypothesis supported by recent research. None of the individuals in the sample partnerships had any pre-existing relationships with anyone else in the schools with which they were partnered. Only one of the interviewees had undertaken RATL work with anyone with whom they had a pre-standing relationship, when he returned to a school he had previously worked at to contribute to training there.

The following table summarises the arguments for categorising the partnerships in this study as exhibiting predominantly weak-tie characteristics.

Ties between institutions are likely to be characterised as strong where:	The RATL ties in this study can be characterised as weak because:
partners perceive that their relationship can be characterised as intense or close	partners perceived little intensity or closeness in the relationships
the partnership has existed over an extended period of time, and regular and frequent contact is maintained	partnerships predominantly revolved around one central transfer activity, which did not usually lead to any substantial follow-up
the partnership exists between different levels within the institutions and involves the development of different focuses	partnerships tended to be focused on one developmental theme, and where this involved more than one practitioner, it was not for the sake of achieving a multiplex relationship
partnership activity explicitly aims to develop the practice of both partners, who are sufficiently similar to facilitate this joint development	partnership activity was frequently primarily focused on developing practice in one of the partner institutions; partners were very conscious of the differences between schools, and saw this as an impediment to transfer
the partnership builds on existing relationships and partners are geographically close enough to sustain and nurture it from this base	the partnerships were almost exclusively new ones, and partner schools were not geographically well placed for easy accessibility

The role of trust in practice transfer

So, the RATL relationships investigated did not seem to provide evidence that they fulfilled any of the criteria indicating strong ties. Yet, interestingly, this appeared perfectly consistent with an overriding impression from participants about the effectiveness of the project as a mechanism for practice transfer. The vast majority of participants concurred with Andy Hargreaves about the efficacy of the project in general, and their contact with other schools in particular (one deputy at a project school noted: "I've not come across a better mechanism that appears to have had a greater impact than the RATL project.") Weak ties between schools would appear to be a source of strength when it comes to transferring practice under certain circumstances.

How could this be the case if the rather fleeting and transient nature of the relationships did not provide an opportunity for the development of trust – something consistently suggested as crucial in the previous literature? Mayer et al (1995) define trust as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable". Both parties within a process of practice transfer potentially make themselves vulnerable: the originating school by opening up their practice to the scrutiny of others, the recipient school by admitting to the need for external input from a partner. Levin and Cross (2004) note that trust is usually seen as important in practice transfer because seeing the source of the practice as trustworthy increases the chance that the receiver will learn from and absorb the knowledge that is transferred. They suggest that while there is no absolute link between tie strength and trust (as we can mistrust extremely close colleagues, and entrust relative strangers with intimate secrets), in general, we are more likely to develop trust with those with whom we have close ties. They conclude that it is actually the trust that is the significant factor in encouraging successful practice transfer, and that the other characteristics of strong ties are just as likely to hinder as to facilitate it. The perfect scenario, for them, would be a weak-tie relationship that is also a trusting one.

Interestingly, within the context of RATL relationships there was little sense that trust was something that needed to be constructed or developed as a precursor to any type of meaningful practice transfer, as is consistently implied by many previous considerations of transfer relationships. Within the context of the RATL project, staff from 11 of the 12 schools in the achieved sample explicitly stated that the condition of sufficient trust pre-existed any specific interactions between the schools. This enabled the relationships to be short-term or transient, yet still powerful for learning. The data suggested three main reasons for this.

Firstly, 12 out of the 20 interviewed made reference to the importance of pre-existing professional trust. In other words, they perceived amongst fellow practitioners a pre-disposition to a quality of trust that was capable of facilitating some transfer activity. This was not a recognition that sufficient trust existed to allow *any* kind of exchange relationship; indeed, there was evidence of an implicit understanding that different types of relationship and transfer required different types of trust. However, it was consistently perceived, as expressed here, that there was not always a need for a trust-building stage:

> "My first impression is always to trust the other school. Probably, the only holding back is on the personal side of school information or staff information – that would have to come with time, if you wanted to talk about individuals, or specific events. Yeh, but on the sharing of good practice, and improving results and stuff, yeh, I'd always trust other schools." (Middle manager, suburban mentor school)

Secondly, five interviewees provided evidence of what might be described as proxy trust. That is, because the teachers involved in the RATL project trusted the project

itself, its systems and its leaders – and perhaps the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, in a wider sense – that there was automatically an implicit trust in the schools that worked with them in transfer activities. It could be speculated that this wider trust was something that, in itself, needed to be established and nurtured, but once developed it enabled weak-tie relationships to allow effective transfer. Interviewees expressed a great amount of faith in the central mechanisms of the RATL project:

> "I think that trust didn't play a particularly important part in what we've done [with] our partner, because the partnership came about, for a very specific reason. And through a particular mechanism, which was the RATL project. Now the trust was in the quality of the RATL project, from both sides. So there was trust and, from my point of view, I was particularly impressed with the organisation and ethos of the RATL project, and obviously there must have been a degree of trust on our partner's part to agree to be involved in that particular way, as they have been." (Deputy headteacher, semi-rural project school)

Thirdly, four interviewees referred to trust, not in the partner institution, but in the ability of the recipient school to be able to identify and gather what is necessary for transfer, despite the intentions or motivations of the originating school. In other words, the partnership activity was not envisaged as a process of mutual sense-making or trust-nurturing, but almost one that can be described as 'licensed imitation'. The extracts below are good examples of this, almost depicting representatives from the receiving school as hunters allowed into a reserve, keen to carry off whatever is available from the opportunity:

> "If I see something that I think will benefit our students, and our families, trust is not something I consider. You know, I think we're all working together in the same business and I'm always open and honest about what I'm doing: I'm here to dig, I'm here to find gold, and I'll run away with it if I find what I want. And that's what I'm here for. So if you don't want me to have something, you don't want me to use something, you must say. Because if you don't, I'll use it, because it will benefit our students." (Deputy headteacher, dormitory town project school)

> "I'm not sure were talking about trust in our partner school but trust in the individuals we sent out. That if we have invested money in them, in sending them out that far, the trust is that they will be professional in terms of collecting data, but also in terms of reflecting and evaluating what they found out. Not with a vested interest, but the overall interests of the school, the school being everybody in it, the students, the staff, and so on, so that's the trust. They're being observed, and we're sending out so many people that if they tried to hide anything – and I'm sure they weren't – then it would be exposed by the professionalism of our staff in collecting and evaluating and reporting back, of course." (Deputy headteacher, semi-rural project school)

Interestingly, this is not untypical of how recipient schools appeared to position themselves. They did not generally see themselves as passive recipients waiting to be given hallowed knowledge by the mentor schools. They saw themselves as being engaged in an active process of seeking out what might be of use to them and incorporating it within their institutions. Consequently, the language they use is not always what might be expected within a partnership activity. Half of the project schools used metaphors of theft (stealing, pinching, the magpie principle) to describe their acquisition of practice, even though this acquisition took place within the context of a mutually acknowledged sharing partnership.

The strengths of weak-tie relationships

Participants identified many things that they found effective about the RATL project. These included the blend of conferences, school-to-school partnerships and input from consultant headteachers. They appreciated that it was essentially a peer improvement model, and that there were resources available to support improvement activities. Interestingly, several of the most significant potential benefits they identified were a consequence of the weak-tie characteristics of the majority of the RATL relationships in which they had been involved.

Firstly, participants appreciated that the RATL project allowed them to draw on the experience and practice of a range of schools. Implicit in this was the understanding that this would not have been possible if each of the relationships had to be a close one. Weak-tie relationships do not require the considerable investment of resources necessary to sustain stronger-tie relationships. A one-off visit requires far less in terms of time, money and emotional intensity than one that is closer and more sustained. They therefore allow schools access to a wide range of practice. This led many interviewees to express a preference for this type of relationship:

> "I'd say that the one-hit wonder model, I favour the most. Because it's incredibly difficult to sustain a relationship with another school when your head is buried beneath your own parapet, you know, you're running and everyone's kind of keeping the ship afloat, and you know exactly how that is. And every now and again, stopping to take time with a partner school to foster those relationships, build those relationships, requires an awful lot, and I just don't think that I, personally, have had the time to develop the kinds of relationships with schools that I would want." (Deputy heateacher, semi-rural project school)

> "The bit that I struggle with is that I can go to one of these things and meet a school in London, say, who've got a particular way of doing, well, anything you can think of, and say let's work together on this. Because of time, distance, and the different cultures you're working in, I don't think that bit works. But the flagging up of the ideas and the going along, and the other bit, which is very, very useful, is the bit where we all sit down and answer the questions… I think that is a very powerful thing." (Deputy headteacher, market town project school)

Schools were clear that it was often the opportunity to explore a range of different perspectives on the same issue that was particularly valuable as a way of energising the development of their own practice.

Secondly, the RATL project allowed the construction of weak-tie relationships that could act as bridges to different and innovative pools of practice outside a school's local area. RATL schools had access to a database of schools and their practice on a national – rather than a regional – basis. If schools were genuinely to exploit this, it would seem more likely this would happen through weak rather than strong-tie relationships. Weak-tie relationships can exist over a much greater geographical distance than it would be possible to continue a strong-tie relationship. They therefore allow schools to select partnerships on the basis of potential benefit rather than geographical convenience. As a result, they can help schools break out of the potentially inward-looking agenda of a local area. For Granovetter (1973), this access to "non-redundant" information was one of the fundamental strengths of weak ties. Institutions involved in stronger tie relationships (so, for example, within this context this might be represented by schools already working together within a local consortium or confederation, although it could equally apply to schools tied by a common local authority, that are otherwise watching each other closely in a tight

competitive market) have relatively easy access to information about the practices being undertaken in each other's schools. It then becomes more likely that practices that develop in one school will be evaluated formally or informally by the others and that these can then be diffused throughout the group as far as they are judged useful and the transfer can be achieved. Within such groups, each school can feel it has a handle on what other schools are doing. Pockets of practice emerge that may quickly establish themselves as conventional, and even mundane, like small ecosystems sheltered from external intrusion. Everyone within the strong-tie community knows roughly the same things, so there is redundancy regarding the information held. If this is repeated nationally, the result is a patchwork of local pools of practice.

A possible advantage of a weak-tie relationship, which might be not be selected on a geographical basis, is that it can act as a bridging tie that joins different parts of this patchwork together. It therefore provides access to the ideas and practices which, although they may appear conventional to those within the strong-tie community, are innovative to those outside it. This was a factor noted in many of the RATL relationships studied, as demonstrated in the examples below:

> "You do tend to get regional clustering where if one school tries out a really good idea, perhaps other schools in its area tend to go down that road. So there are particular ways of doing things in [x-county] many of which work very well. But to step outside of that and to go to [y-region], and see a totally different educational set-up, where, quite clearly, schools are used to operating differently, that's a great strength of having a partnership a long way away." (Deputy headteacher, semi-rural project school)

> "I think from my perspective, coming into post three or four years ago, it was about looking beyond [y-county] and that is why the RATL project is so important, because [z-county], from my perspective, has been quite inward-looking and quite satisfied with its position. And, actually, we need to look outwards, to see what other schools are doing, where it was probably a slightly more radical dynamic." (Headteacher, suburban project school)

Thirdly, the evidence suggests that weak-tie relationships could potentially offer more flexibility and ownership of practice development. Where a strong tie exists between schools and practice is developed jointly between representatives from both institutions, there is a danger the resulting practice will not entirely suit either, or that development will be hampered by conflicting cultural expectations. Where practice is transferred across a close-tie relationship, for example, where practice is developed jointly by staff from different institutions, it is possible that the different needs of the institutions may make it difficult to generate practice that is equally relevant to both parties. Indeed, at a theoretical level, if the knowledge that lies behind practice is actually situated within its own context, it could be argued that it is unlikely that knowledge generated in the 'space' between institutions could be meaningful in either without an added stage of translation or regeneration into each of the partner's individual institutions.

Even at a purely practical level, it is possible that joint working in a close-tie relationship, where the construction and sustenance of the relationship as a entity in itself is a fundamental part of the process, that deference to the norms, expectations and culture of the partner institution can be an unwelcome barrier to the efficient generation of practice that is effective and pertinent for the institutions individually. Where the transfer relationship is clearly one of originator–recipient, the close tie relationship presents the associated possible problem of the efficient disengagement of the originator, whereby the originating institution does not maintain an unhelpful and stifling hold on the direction of the transfer and the receiving institution does not rely too heavily on the expertise and experience of the originator. Some mentor

schools suggested that the nature of the weak-tie relationship facilitated this efficient disengagement, which could potentially prove an unwelcome burden:

> "I think there is a possible disadvantage in reliance, in having all the answers. Um, you know, there's a difference between support and dependence, and we are there primarily for support, not for dependence, and I think where that line's crossed it can get a little bit demanding." (Deputy headteacher, urban mentor school)

Practice transfer across a weak-tie relationship offers the potential benefit of minimising such restrictions, allowing practice to be transferred, and for the ownership of the practice and the immediate responsibility for its implementation to be assumed by the recipient.

This was another advantage of the weak-tie model noted by RATL schools. They saw a disincentive to strengthen relationships because of the dissimilar contexts of the partner schools:

> "We haven't followed up on all of them by any means, because we have to adapt them to our own situation, and that's the point, I think, I'm getting at, about the benefits of this close contact with another school, um, because we are so unique… Most of the things we hear about, we have to think 'how is that going to work when the Year 11s are there and the Year 10s are here', and so on. So you take them, you adapt them." (Deputy headteacher, market town project school)

Mentor schools, themselves, noted that partner schools were not always keen to maintain a relationship that might be interpreted as an attempt to oversee the successful implementation of a particular practice, when they felt that what they really wanted was the opportunity to run with an idea in their own way.

A fourth advantage of practice transfer across the weak-tie relationships in the RATL schools suggested by this study is specific to the educational context in question. Namely, that weak-tie relationships are particularly appropriate to practice transfer within an educational environment characterised – rightly or wrongly – by high levels of competition. There are many factors that combine to make strong-tie relationships much more likely to be operational at a relatively local level. Geographical proximity is identified by Marsden and Campbell (1984) as a predictor of closeness in itself. Pre-existing links at all levels are more likely to occur within a local area. Strong-tie relationships are characterised by great commitments of time over a sustained period, while resourcing implications alone mean these are most likely to happen within a close geographical area. Yet, conversely, the context in which suspicion and hostility resulting from the pressures of competition are most likely to be prevalent is precisely within this local area. So whereas previous research identifies close ties as a requisite for effective knowledge transfer, the reality of the educational environment suggests that these will be undermined by other tensions within the system. Weak ties do not require such an intensity of time or emotion, and, as such, may be constructed across wider geographical areas. They can, therefore, link schools outside those competitive geographical areas and negate any immediate feelings of competitive rivalry. If weak ties can be an effective conduit for practice transfer, then this suggests there may be a fit between weak-tie transfer and the contemporary educational landscape.

The research data provides robust evidence that practitioners perceive that the levels of competition they identify between schools can potentially act as a barrier to effective partnership:

"We're in the lucky position of being oversubscribed, because the school down the road has gone into special measures, we're nicking all their kids. There's a dog-eat-dog situation here. You're fighting for your sixth form, trying to keep your sixth form going, fighting for numbers. You're always looking over your back, so we could never work with a school nearby here, because there's too much competition. Everybody accepts that." (Deputy headteacher, county town project school)

"Some of our closest schools who are on the RATL project have had absolutely nothing to do with us. They almost blankly refuse. We've got a school that's, maybe, three miles down the road which will not come here, not set foot, and I think that's that local competition thing which is going on in the mentality and culture." (Deputy headteacher, urban mentor school)

Schools valued the chance to learn from other schools far removed from the (however unfortunate) reality of local competition. They seemed well aware of the irony, summarised in the extract below, of a situation in which it is simpler to engage in an effective partnership with a school at a distance than it is with an immediate neighbour:

"The closer the school, the more the politics play a part. It's quite liberating to go into a school that's a hundred miles away. You're not sharing, you're not competing within the same catchment area. In fact, I would say that the upper school down the road, our competitor, which is not how I see it, I think that the collaborative training that's happened between our school and their school has been appalling. We've really missed an opportunity, and that's because there's mistrust, because we're competing for the same kids… But to go somewhere like London, or to York, or to Birmingham, to actually share, or to Cambridge, is actually quite easy." (Deputy headteacher, dormitory town project school)

Participants were very clear that the fact they were able to identify and articulate strengths of the kind of weak-tie relationships they encountered through RATL did not mean they dismissed the need for relationships of a stronger kind. Participants were able to contrast their RATL relationships with other relationships they had developed, which had stronger tie characteristics. Some were confident and clear about the need to match the type of relationship to the kind of practice they wanted to transfer:

"I believe that people could have taken away from the day what they needed to on the day, that just being out of school looking round a school, and just taking away an idea which could be implemented such as on the personalised study leave… I don't believe they need to get back in contact with us to implement that. So a lot of what happened on the day was that ideas were taken away that didn't need specific support. It was more to do with ideas for the school rather than skills and the development of individuals, where I believe that would need closer liaison with that member of staff." (Middle manager, town mentor school)

As the statement above suggests, the research suggests that the types of practice that have been most frequently transferred through RATL relationships have not been those that can be classified as having a large tacit dimension. Indeed, it is often pointed out that education is a business with a large tacit element. The core business of how a teacher teaches children in a classroom is often cited as a key example of a practitioner knowing more than they can say – the complex, subtle and nuanced interactions between teacher and pupils is not always consciously understood by the practitioner who has facilitated them, and certainly not easily made explicit for transfer purposes. It is clear that the RATL project transfers that have been

illuminated by this study have not usually focused on the direct exchange of classroom practice, but rather on the organisational processes that underpin them.

This is not to say that classroom practice has been entirely removed from the relationships in the project – assessment for learning and thinking skills have both been described as focuses for transfer activity within the case study schools. However, the focus has tended to be in terms of the organisational implications of these, rather than what they might look like in the classroom; for example, how schools might adopt a half-term learning to learn module for Year 7 pupils on initial entry to the school. It should also be noted that it is impossible to completely separate organisational processes from classroom practice; the transition of a school from, say, mixed-ability teaching to streaming will have a profound impact on the life of the classroom. Yet, it is not predominantly the classroom practice level on which these RATL exchanges were focused. This may be influenced by the fact that most of the key personnel involved in the RATL relationships studied were senior leaders, with a primary responsibility for overseeing the organisational structures that facilitate effective classroom learning.

Thus, interviewees articulated the perception that different types of relationship would be most relevant for different purposes in the attempt to learn from other schools – "horses for courses", as one deputy headteacher put it. Where weak-tie relationships seemed appropriate for the transfer of organisational or procedural practice, they often identified stronger ties as being more appropriate where issues involving individual teachers and their practice in the classroom came into focus. As such, one could speculate that the evidence suggests that the strength of a weak-tie relationship is in *exploiting* existing capacity within a school. The strength of a strong-tie relationship is in its potential for *developing* capacity, particularly by enhancing the professional skills of individual teachers. Therefore, the nearer one gets to classroom practice and the nearer one gets to the skill levels of individual teachers, the closer the relationship needs to be for the effective transfer of practice:

> "You probably have to differentiate between short-term and long-term links between schools. There are schools that it will be a one-shot process… we may never hear from them again. They went to RATL and said 'we need help with this.' RATL said your local school which has that is us. I think there are other schools where it will be a much longer-term thing, so somewhere which is looking at their use of whole-school data and assessment, I think that will be ongoing." (Deputy headteacher, urban mentor school)

It is particularly worth noting that some interviewees expressed a nagging guilt that maybe they should be doing more to make their weak-tie relationships stronger; a sense of guilt that was seemingly quite at odds with the constructive benefits that they, themselves, were also able to articulate and demonstrate as having resulted from their weak-tie relationships:

> "Obviously, with like all of the schools which we've contacted to bond with us a little bit more, and form greater partnerships…" (Deputy headteacher, urban mentor school)

> "I just don't think that I personally have had the time to develop the kinds of relationships with schools that I would want." (Deputy headteacher, dormitory town project school)

Where does this sense of guilt come from? It is possible that it stems, to some extent, from the psychological predisposition of teachers themselves, who see themselves as people people, for whom the development of close relationships is integral to their core purpose of relating to young learners. It is also possible, of

course, that the pre-eminence of close tie relationships in the research literature described here has filtered into the perceptions of practitioners. This raises the danger that an overemphasis within the teaching profession of the importance of strong-tie relationships has had the unfortunate effect of leading to the development of a slightly pejorative view of weaker tie ones. It is possible that schools in general would benefit from a climate in which the role of each is clearly understood and properly valued, and in which the relationship appropriate to the kind of inter-school learning needed can be analysed, without any sense that one sort of relationship is in any way inherently inferior to another.

The table below summarises what the findings of this study suggest about the strengths of weak and strong ties when schools work together to achieve school improvement.

Weak ties are most useful when:	Strong ties are most useful when:
bridging ties are needed to access practice in different geographical regions	bonding ties are needed to help locally collaborating schools develop practice jointly
the practice to be transferred concerns the organisational framework that facilitates learning	the practice to be transferred concerns classroom pedagogy and the professional skills of individuals
a school's primary objective is to exploit existing capacity	a school's primary objective is to develop existing capacity
an institution requires a breadth of relationships in order to access a range of perspectives on an issue	an institution requires depth in a relationship for the purposes of mentoring, coaching, nurturing
a school wishes to circumvent local competition	a school wishes to undermine local competition
a common developmental framework could be restrictive to schools from contrasting contexts	a common developmental framework could be advantageous to help meet a particular local need
limited resources are available to provide momentum and direction to the development of practice within a school	significant resources can be marshalled to develop practice between schools
the essential outcome of the partnership is the development of practice in one of the partners	the mutual impact of the practice development is an essential outcome of a partnership

The transfer of best practice

There was an overwhelming scepticism about the concept of best practice, particularly the officially sanctioned idea that practice that seems effective in one school could easily be reproduced in another, with the same result:

> "Well, I suppose I worry when people, politicians, suggest that there is that blueprint, in effect, school X is doing this therefore everyone can do it. Because I think you need to be sure you are comparing like with like, and very rarely are you doing so." (Headteacher, suburban project school)

> "This is not a model which will fit any school. A great example of that is vertical tutoring. From our own experiences and research, we've concluded that you have to have positive role models in the senior part of your school for vertical tutor groups to work effectively. And if you don't have those senior role models, it's pointless. So I think best practice is always difficult because it's not in context. What works here may not work elsewhere." (Deputy headteacher, urban mentor school)

Yet this cynicism sat happily with an enthusiasm for the idea of school improvement facilitated by learning from other schools. Interestingly, while previous research has suggested a match between weak-tie relationships and the transfer of the kind of explicit, codified knowledge that can be easily articulated as a blueprint or manual (Hansen, 1999), evidence from this research suggests this was not something desired by RATL participants. The extracts below are typical of interviewees who almost universally agreed that any practice originating in another school must be substantially modified before it can have any relevance in a new context:

> "I think almost inevitably you take things and you adapt them to your circumstances. I think you have to… So I guess that I am into the cherry-picking model because it's right for what's happening here, and out of that you create something which is unique and different. We wouldn't expect to take it wholesale." (Deputy headteacher, city project school)

> "I believe the staff and the make-up of every school is very different and that you will need to change something because of the effect that it would have upon your policies, your school timetables, etc. So you would actually have to adapt it in some way. I don't believe that a school could be that similar that it could just pick up and pop in a policy." (Middle manager, town mentor school)

Indeed, many interviewees perceived that, for most of the RATL practice transfers, the scale of necessary adaptation was large, to the point where the process in question went beyond what could most aptly be described as modifying a practice to shape it for a new context. Most interviewees from project schools suggested that the transfer of an idea or an inspiration was a more significant outcome of the RATL partnerships than the transfer of anything more concrete or detailed. Schools were not primarily interested in the fine detail of how the practice they were investigating was actually achieved, as is evidenced in the extracts below:

> "I think in our case it was about getting the idea and developing it here. It was the idea. We looked at the experiences of three or four schools and we went and talked in more depth about things that had happened. And then we brought it back because everything we do here is part of a consultation programme. So we've had a massive consultation programme." (Deputy headteacher, suburban project school)
> "I think very little would be taken directly from our partner. But the idea is that the original question that they asked – which is why do you have Key Stage 3 in three years – is an incredibly powerful question. The experience of our link… has been a catalyst in asking significant questions, and finding our own particular answers to those questions. So, in this respect our work with them would have provided all the impetus, that's probably true. The chances of us ending up with a model that is in any way similar to theirs, or certainly consciously based on it, that's highly unlikely." (Deputy headteacher, semi-rural project school)

In other cases, the external input was judged to be important, but its greatest importance was as a spur to carrying forward a process that had already been initiated in some way:

> "Then that got reinforced by what we were hearing at RATL and I think the RATL thing gave us the confidence to say, yeh, there are loads of other people doing this, it's not quite such a crazy idea as it might appear." (Deputy headteacher, market town project school)

What they wanted from their weak-tie relationships was not a blueprint to be replicated, but ideas and inspiration that could catalyse developments in their own

institutions. The major contributory factor to any practice development within their schools would be their own school's capacity. The external input was predominantly to provide direction and momentum.

This could be seen to have some not insignificant implications that could form the basis for future research. It suggests that for weak ties to be the basis of practice transfer activity, it is important that any school looking to develop its practice needs to have a level of internal capacity that can be catalysed by an external input in this way. It could be that schools with significant capacity issues, such as those that are in special measures, will struggle to exploit weak-tie relationships successfully. It is possible that close tie relationships with partners who are in a position to support them with the resources necessary to build up their capacity will be required.

The channels for practice transfer

The nature of the input favoured by many of the schools goes some way to explaining the nature of the relationship and the preference for certain types of exchange activity. It has been stated already that, on starting this research, it had been assumed the RATL relationships would provide a diversity of tie strengths, and it was surprise to find such a predominant bias towards weak-tie relationships. Similarly, it was assumed it would be through school-to-school relationships that the most meaningful contributions to practice transfer would occur. Yet the research process has revealed that schools were equally able to draw valuable contributions to practice transfer through other, even more fleeting, exchanges, particularly through the presentations at conferences and even the 'rondeval' sessions – 15-minute presentations from practitioners about what was going on in their school. The extract below was typical of how many interviewees gained value from the most fleeting exchanges:

> "I still think the biggest thing is the actual conferences and not necessarily the visits. The visits simply consolidate your thinking, you know; the conferences give you the engagement, you see what a school has tried and they say what they've done, and then perhaps you go and visit and that consolidates. Yeh, you know, you think, yeh, we need to get back and get on with it. If you've got problems or questions you might contact, but the transfer is almost, like, done, complete, and you're in a position then to go forward. So, really, I haven't felt the need to go back." (Deputy headteacher, county town project school)

Existing theoretical frameworks suggest that there is a match between weak-tie relationships and non-relational channels of practice transfer. Indeed, it is often stated that weak-tie relationships are most appropriate for the use of electronic media. Conversely, most research in schools suggests that teachers tend to use relational channels wherever possible, and demonstrate a reluctance to work with non-relational media. This research confirms entirely this picture of practitioners' resistance to non-relational channels, but suggests a different perspective on why teachers prefer face-to-face meetings. Most previous explanations have centred either on capacity – either of staff themselves not having the requisite skills to exploit electronic media, or in terms of hardware – or because of the nature of teachers – they are people people who have chosen to enter a people-centred profession, most of whose core experience is of communicating in a direct relational way with pupils. It is hardly surprising that they opt for this method of dialogue when it comes to practice transfer projects. While the research data does not discount these explanations (indeed, four interviewees in each case mentioned this as a reason), the most commonly attributed explanation was closely connected to the preceding discussion. Nine of the interviewees suggested that a crucial reason relational channels are preferred is because of the opportunity they offer practitioners to interact with the material they are faced with, to probe and to question, to weigh up the visual cues of

the investigator and to take discussion down the path that is relevant to them. So the preference for face-to face is intimately connected to the fact that they are not looking to transfer a clearly codified practice, a blueprint or handbook. They are primarily looking for an idea or inspiration and want to have the opportunity to weigh up the contextual distance between its implementation at the originating institution and its potential destination.

> "I think a day's visit has given us far more than if they sent us stuff to look at. You get that in some leaflets and magazines in the post all the time… By actually going there you are concentrating and are not distracted. It's not that you don't believe what's written, but when you are talking to students, when you are talking to teachers, you get a far stronger sense of what they feel is right and what they don't feel is right. And I think that is as important… You can pick up what that's meant to that person professionally, and how he's seen it working with the students there; and that sort of thing you just can't get from the written page." (Deputy headteacher, semi-rural project school)

Conclusions

The case for the importance of strong ties in the transfer of practice between secondary schools in England has been well made in other recent studies, and this research does not challenge the fact that such strong-tie relationships have a significant part to play in school improvement. Yet there is a danger that, by implication, the potential offered by weaker tie relationships will be ignored, and that practitioners will constantly feel guilty about relationships that are more transient. This research sends a clear message to school leaders that they cannot afford to concentrate on only developing one or two close relationships with partner schools. They must cast their net more widely and investigate innovative practice outside their locality. They must make difficult decisions about the most appropriate type of relationship to aid any new practice development. The wise school leader will combine strong ties with select partners with the range offered by a changing array of weak-tie partnerships. The research also suggests that increasing capacity – both technical and human – in ICT will not necessarily reduce the desire of practitioners in schools to move away from relational head-to-head meetings as a preferred means of practice transfer; the evidence suggests this is an important part of the way that school leaders 'filter' the elements of external practice that they allow to have an impact in their schools.

The research also confirms that the concept of best practice is not necessarily seen as a very helpful one by practitioners. Perhaps on some occasions the label 'catalytic practice' would be more appropriate. While the recently proposed concept of "joint practice development" (Fielding et al, 2005) may well be a useful and apt description of what is desirable when schools are developing strong-tie relationships, it is suggested here that it is perhaps not sufficient to describe all efforts to facilitate practice development though partnership work, and particularly where schools work to learn from each other through weak-tie relationships.

It is suggested here that a concept of catalytic practice might be both a better and more useful way of describing the role the practice in one school plays in developing the practice in another school across a weak-tie relationship.

In addition to the more general social science definition of a catalyst as something that precipitates a process or event, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* offers the following specialist definition from the field of chemistry:

> "Catalyst: a substance, usually used in small amounts relative to the reactants, that modifies and increases the rate of a reaction without being consumed in the process."

I would like to suggest three reasons why this definition of a catalyst makes the phrase catalytic practice appropriate to describe the role the practice in one school plays in developing the practice in another school across a weak-tie relationship:

1. It recognises that although the role the originating school's practice plays in developing practice in the recipient school is important, the process relies predominantly on the capacity of the recipient school. This research suggests that the proportions described in this definition reflect the reality of the proportionate inputs of internal and external factors in practice development.

2. It recognises the possibility that the role the practice in the originating school plays may be that of an accelerator rather than necessarily as an instigator of practice development.
3. It recognises that across a weak-tie relationship it is possible the practice of the originating school will not be significantly altered in the practice transfer process.

Furthermore, there are three reasons why the conceptualisation of catalytic practice is preferable to that of good or best practice in describing how practice residing in one school plays a role in the development of practice in another across a weak-tie relationship:

1. It provides a more accurate description of the role the external practice plays in the development of practice in the recipient institution. The idea of best practice places an emphasis within the transfer on the originator, whereas the concept of catalytic practice returns the emphasis to the capacity of the recipient institution. It suggests the importance of the requisite capacity of the recipient school for practice development to take place. A catalyst will have no impact if the appropriate reactants are not present.

2. It accommodates the possibility of diverse outcomes when the practice in question is exposed to a variety of different institutional contexts. The concept of best practice suggests its diffusion amongst schools will result in schools that all exhibit identical models of practice. The concept of catalytic practice confirms that different schools will react in different ways to the same stimulus, depending on their own contextual factors and capacity.

3. It carries with it no absolute judgement of worth or quality. The term catalytic is morally neutral, conveying nothing more than a description of the role that the practice plays. The terms good or best practice convey a clear sense of superiority over comparable practices. Yet evidence suggests that what works well in one context might not work so productively in another.

Recent government emphasis on schools learning from each other has struck many practitioners as a refreshing and constructive change of direction away from a narrow commitment to competition between institutions. It is something teachers see as having huge potential advantages. Yet recent experiences have also highlighted the vast challenges of ensuring that joint working does indeed fulfil its promise. These challenges are unlikely to diminish. The overarching architecture of competition is unlikely to be removed in the near future and so will remain the context in which any collaboration necessarily happens. It is also possible that central government will maintain the policy of incentivising collaboration by resourcing partnerships initially, with the intention that they will eventually become self-sustaining, as has been the model with the Networked Learning Community programme. Under such conditions, schools will have a vested interest in becoming expert at exploiting their weak-tie relationships fruitfully.

If you have any comments about this report please email the author Paul Lawrence on plawrence@comberton.cambs.sch.uk

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