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## Research Associate Report

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# Getting our heads together:

shared leadership of a collaborative school  
improvement project

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## Introduction

One of the biggest challenges facing school leaders today is how to create the climate within which to build and sustain improvement. This becomes even more critical in schools facing challenging circumstances. Historically, this has not been helped by the competition between some schools over recruitment of both staff and students. A raft of government initiatives and the continued drive towards an education system partly funded by private-sector business and industry has heightened the focus on private and public working together. For some this has translated into more competitive behaviour. This study is about how a group of leaders from five diverse secondary schools and partner organisations worked together to lead a collaborative school improvement project.

The impact of market forces has been significant in the education sector. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, government policy saw the education system in England shift from the ideal of local schools for local communities to the notion of parents and children as consumers of education. Morrison (1998) suggests that,

Policy making for education in the 1980s and 1990s changed schools bringing them much more onto a business footing than previously, principally through the devolution of budgetary control to schools and the impact of marketisation on schools.(1998:5)

This is exemplified by the Education Acts of 1986, 1988, 1992 and 1993, which introduced privatisation, diversity, freedom from constraint and quality control into the educational arena. At the centre of government policy of the time was open enrolment or parental choice. Tomlinson (1993) proposed that treating parents merely as consumers prevented schools developing productive partnerships with them. This allows parents to become self appointed regulators of the system by virtue of the power and influence they can exercise.

The outcome of a longitudinal study, *Parental and School Choice Interaction*, published by Woods et al (1998) identifies significant changes in parental choice and secondary schools' response to local competition and market forces. The Grant Maintained scheme of the early 1990s, the reduction of power of local authorities, the Specialist Schools and Academies initiative, Private Finance Initiative (PFI) and Building Schools for the Future (BSF) are indicative of the government's continued drive towards an education system partly funded by private-sector business and industry. The notion of parent (and pupil) as consumer continues to proliferate current educational policy with the 2005 White Paper *Higher Standards: Better Schools for All* giving parents even more power by proposing that they and other interested parties should have the opportunity to set up trust schools.

The competition that these successive policies has engendered has, in some places, been a major obstacle to fostering positive working relationships between schools, a critical element in the formation of any collaborative arrangements. It could be argued that the question 'how do we move schools from competition to collaboration?' is fundamental if we are to get to grips with the new leadership and school improvement agendas where the development of networks and school to school partnerships are seen as a key driver in building the capacity for sustainable improvement. As if to address this issue, there has been a plethora of government initiatives designed to encourage collaboration. Central to Leading Edge Partnerships, Networked Learning Communities and Federations is the notion of collaboration and sharing of 'best' practice. The current methodology of measuring school improvement by focusing on outcomes means that there is a fairly clear understanding of what to collaborate on.

Documents from NCSL (2001), DfES and Ofsted make suggestions about what schools should working together on:

- shared planning
- lesson observations
- resources
- monitoring
- systems and structures

There is less clarity and understanding about how schools should collaborate. This study explores the process, rather than the product of collaboration with the intention of providing a framework of reference for school leaders.

### **Outline of this study**

This study is part of an EdD in Educational Leadership being undertaken at the University of Nottingham and supported by an NCSL Research Associateship. It is based on my work with a group of senior leaders across five secondary schools sharing the leadership of a school improvement project and will attempt to answer three key questions:

1. What conditions are required to enable successful shared leadership?
2. What are the barriers to this and how can they be overcome?
3. What are the implications of this study for my and others' work in this area?

I will mainly draw on the work of Day (2000), Fullan (1993, 2001) Goleman (2002) Lambert (1998), Harris & Lambert (2003) and Hargreaves (2003) in addition to policy documents and discussion papers from Ofsted, NCSL and the DfES to provide a theoretical context for my work. I will begin by exploring the history of collaboration in secondary schools over the past 20 years and consider the connections between collaboration and leadership. I will then introduce the research methodology and exploring my research questions in the light of the data. Using Lambert's 'skills required by school leaders for effective collaboration' as a starting point to address my key research questions, I will use the outcomes of the research to move beyond this into identifying further conditions required for effective shared leadership and to develop my own framework. In conclusion, I will reflect on the potential resonance of the findings for others involved in collaboration.

# Historical and political context of the study

## 1. From competition to collaboration

In an era of league tables, performance management, academies and specialist schools; where schools and teachers are desperately trying to get an edge over the opposition, why would they want to share good practice with their competitors? Historically, schools have operated very much in isolation and been keen to retain the secrets of their success.

In contrast to this, school improvement research by Hargreaves & Fullan (1998), Harris & Lambert (2002) and others cites collaboration within and between schools as a key factor in the school improvement process. Running parallel to the collaboration agenda is the re-engineering of leadership. According to research by Lambert (1998) and Day et al (2000), effective leadership that meets the demands of schools in challenging contexts is demonstrated by a more empowering model of shared or distributed leadership rather than the traditional hierarchical structure model with the headteacher as a patriarchal authority figure. This presents two concerns: firstly, how do we empower leaders to feel able to collaborate with their competitors and secondly, how do we ensure that they embrace the new models of leadership which will facilitate greater staff engagement?

Over the past 20 years, there has been a significant shift in expectation of how schools and teachers operate. Hargreaves (2003) suggests that this has seen the culture of schools and the role of teachers evolve from the insular, unscrutinised model of teacher delivery to a situation of increased accountability, performance management and a new knowledge-based professionalism. Barber (2000), in a paper presented to the OECD Schooling for Tomorrow conference, suggested that the first strategic challenge to educational reform is to reconceptualise teaching,

...the education workforce – especially the teaching profession – will need to change radically ....The necessary changes will encompass everything from attitudes to pedagogy and will be nothing short of revolutionary. (Barber, 2000: 9)

Barber continues by outlining the need for teachers to 'stand up and be held to account for the results their students achieve' (2000:9) and asserts that high expectations are the key to delivering high standards and therefore we need teachers who,

...are constantly seeking out best practice...work in professional learning teams not just in their schools but also outside...have the time and inclination to examine systematically the students' work, discuss the standards achieved and the implications and accept the need for their teaching to be monitored. (2000:9)

There is clearly a tension between the 'best practice' agenda and the existence of competition between schools. As if to reconcile this, a variety of national initiatives have been set up to involve teachers in collaboration. Until recently the most well known of these was the Technical, Vocational and Educational Initiative (TVEI). Introduced as a pilot scheme in 1984, its aim was to increase the employability of young people by encouraging schools to work together to devise projects around 'work related learning'. The TVEI pilot was extended to all local authority funded schools in 1988 and the programme ran until 1997. This programme, which was evaluated by SOIED (1998), had variable rates of success but was used as the model on which a number of other initiatives, such as Excellence in Cities (EiC), were based. Launched in 2003, the

Leadership Incentive Grant (LIG) was a three-year funding stream bringing an annual budget of £125,000 for schools in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage. LIG's core principle is the building of leadership capacity at all levels within schools through collaboration and sharing good practice. This is an interesting innovation as it acknowledges the central role of leadership and collaboration in facilitating school improvement.

There are a number of reasons why schools have been encouraged to be involved in collaborative activity. One view might be that collaboration is of benefit to schools as it offers practitioners opportunities to share and develop their practice without the level of accountability required by government. An alternative view could be that collaboration shifts the responsibility of monitoring performance and raising standards from the local authority (on behalf of the DfES) to partner schools. This implies that those schools involved in collaborative projects are, in effect, colluding with the process of assessing school performance, reinforcing the government mantra of accountability. Whatever the reason behind encouraging collaboration, what must be recognised is the importance of how to make collaboration work.

In exploring the how, we need to have an overview of what conditions enable collaboration. This is about the interpersonal, social and philosophical cultures that exist within the collaborative groups that we are trying to establish. A starting point is to explore the link between leadership and collaboration by examining the type of leadership that best lends itself to collaborative activity.

## **2. Leadership and collaboration**

New models of leadership challenge the prevailing leadership structures of schools because they devolve leadership to teachers working at different levels within or across organisations. Research suggests that the headteacher is instrumental in creating the climate for change essential to any shift of culture within the school. This can be achieved in different ways. Day (2000) suggests the headteacher's engagement in reflective practice is an influential factor in creating a change climate. Harris (2002: xvii) cites the principal's 'creation of contexts and opportunities for expansion, enhancement and growth'. Hargreaves proposes that,

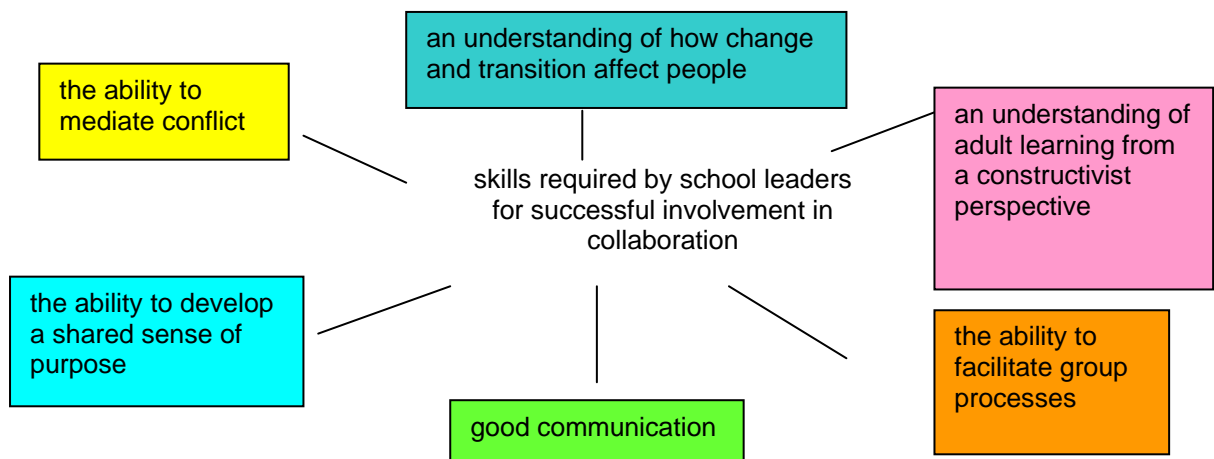
Effective leadership...promoted informal as well as formal collaboration among teachers, embedding joint professional efforts in a web of long lasting and trusted relationships. (2003:130)

In order to move schools and teachers from competition to collaboration, there needs to be a significant change in culture. Weller (1998:250) suggests that 'successful school reform requires a paradigm shift which begins with unlocking the school's existing culture'. Research on school culture by Fullan (1993) and David Hargreaves (1995) provides a theoretical understanding of how school culture is created, while Morrison (1998) and Law & Glover (2000) examine the impact of management theories on educational change. This informs our understanding of how to initiate and manage change. The industrialist Senge (1990) in *The Fifth Discipline* takes a different perspective in developing the concept of the learning organisation,

Where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn together. (1990:3)

It has been suggested by Lambert & Harris (2003) that the headteacher has a role as the lead learner in the organisation to model the type of behaviours they want their colleagues to replicate. This implies that for collaboration (or any other process) to be successful, school leaders need to be supportive of it and display their support in the way that they encourage staff to work together. But do school leaders understand this and, more importantly, are they aware of their role in ensuring that they transmit the right messages about collaboration? Much of the writing which exists about collaboration is set in the context of groups of staff working together within an individual educational establishment. Of interest in this study is how senior leaders might successfully work together across establishments and the impact this might have on colleagues at other levels within the collaborative.

Lambert (1998), in *Building Leadership Capacity in Schools*, a study of three schools in the US with differing leadership capacity, shows that where the school principal is capable of collaboration and inclusive leading, the school has a high leadership capacity. This is characterised by the critical mass of staff having 'the leadership skills to affect the norms, roles and responsibilities of the school' (1998:16). Lambert also provides a useful list of skills required by school leaders if they are to be successfully involved in collaborative work, which I have illustrated in the following diagram (taken from Lambert (1998) *Building Leadership Capacity in Schools*).



It may be helpful here to discuss some of the terms espoused as part of the new leadership frameworks. The two models that I am most concerned with in this study are primarily shared leadership, and, to a lesser extent, distributed leadership. An NFER (2003) literature review carried out for NCSL, *Successful Leadership of Schools in Urban and Challenging Contexts*, describes shared leadership as leadership between the headteacher and one or two senior leaders, whereas distributed leadership moves leadership functions throughout the school and incorporates the concept of the teacher leader.

### 3. Leadership and emotional intelligence

The distinction between leadership style and leadership strategy is not always clear. The literature around successful leadership, Hopkins (2001), Franey (2002), Harris (2002) suggests that some types of leadership, such as the charismatic or transformational, appear to be about the personal characteristics of the leader. Conversely, shared or distributed leadership is seen to be about leader behaviour. However, I would argue that these could be seen as flexible constructs and that successful leaders are able to adapt their behaviour in response to social interactions. This takes us into the area of emotional intelligence and leadership which, although not

a specific focus of this study, has relevance to the way in which individuals function within a group.

The Lambert model offers a diverse set of prerequisites reliant on a high level of affinity with the processes of group interaction and the ability to respond to the needs of others. Goleman (2002: 39) describes emotional intelligence as two types of competence; personal competence ('how we manage ourselves') and social competence ('how we manage relationships'). This cluster of competencies is illustrated in the table below (taken from Goleman D, the *New Leaders: Emotional Intelligence at Work*).

Personal competencies	Social competencies
<p><b>The Self-Awareness Cluster</b> included Emotional Self-Awareness, Accurate Self-assessment and Self-confidence.</p>	<p><b>The Social Awareness Cluster</b> included Empathy, Service Orientation, and Organizational Awareness.</p>
<p><b>The Self-Management Cluster</b> included Emotional Self-control, Achievement, Initiative, Transparency, Adaptability, and Optimism.</p>	<p><b>The Relationship Management Cluster</b> included Inspirational Leadership, Influence, Conflict Management, Change Catalyst, Developing Others, Teamwork and Collaboration.</p>

Hargreaves (2001) in an article entitled *The Emotional Geographies of Teaching* suggests that there has been a higher profile given in recent years to the emotions and that 'teaching and learning are not only concerned with knowledge, cognition and skill. They are also emotional practices' (2001:1056). This implies that for leaders to be effective they need to begin tapping into their own emotions and those of others with whom they attempt to cultivate collaborative partnerships.



## **The study: Sector 3, an example of shared leadership**

This study explores the way in which a group of school leaders from across five secondary schools together with other partners attempted to share the leadership of a school improvement project. The research began a year after the project was set up.

### **1. Research methodology and data collection**

The study was conducted using semi-structured interviews. These took place between April 2004 and February 2006, and involved seven members of the collaborative leadership group of a school improvement project comprising headteachers, deputy or assistant heads, local authority advisers and a private consultant.

Each interview explores participant perspectives on the formation of, and subsequent collaboration between, the project leadership team. Most of the data comes from transcribed interviews and I have included the framework for the semi-structured interview in Appendix 1. Extracts from the interviews have been used with the permission of the respondents. The names of the schools and the participants have been changed. Additional data was provided by transcribing sections of video footage of meetings, interviews and other collaborative activities that took place during the two years.

### **3. Context of the study**

Sector 3 is a small collaborative of five secondary schools in the East Midlands. The collaborative was formed as part of a project to raise attainment at Key Stage 4 within a local authority. This project was funded by the DfES and involved a number of partners; a partner local authority, a private educational consultancy and the 19 secondary schools within the local authority at the time. In June 2002, following an audit conducted by the partner local authority, the 19 secondary schools were grouped into four mixed-ability collaboratives (based on Key Stage 4 attainment in 2001), each containing four or five schools. The five schools in Sector 3 were Beechwood, Broadgreen, Denton, Longdale, and Ramsay. At the start of the project, one school was in special measures, another two were facing challenging circumstances and attainment across the schools ranged from 13% of students gaining 5A\* - C grades to 70%. The grouping process was outlined by Mark, one of the external facilitators.

It was suggested to the heads that the groupings ought to be done not geographically but by levels of attainment based on 2001 GCSE results and this put together some unusual partners really, who would not have anticipated working together... a third ingredient that went in was who are the leaders of these schools; how do they work together; what is their record; how outward looking or inward looking are they; how likely are they to be collaborative... and of course there were views about that.

Ray, headteacher at Ramsay School, gave his take on the grouping of the schools,

The meeting I do remember is that session where Sectors had been devised, I think by the LEA, based on schools' performance. As heads we talked about it, which was an interesting exercise and then we quickly got into our Sectors to decide how we were going to move. Around that time, if I remember rightly, there wasn't too much argument or discussion about which schools should be in each Sector, most city heads and schools accepted what was going to happen.

These four groups of schools, known as 'Sectors', were given a remit to work collaboratively to devise intervention strategies that would impact on Year 11 GCSE results in summer 2003. Each Sector contained what was perceived to be a high-attaining school, together with a range of other schools. The Sectors transcended the partnership arrangements that had been formulated for other initiatives such as Excellence in Cities and, as such, moved the schools to a different way of working.

The study focuses on how shared leadership was developed in Sector 3. The data generated from the interviews will be used against the six aspects of Lambert's 'skills for school leaders' successful involvement in collaboration' framework. The findings will then be used to extend the framework to include other criteria that have been identified as important features of effective shared leadership. The key research questions to be addressed are:

- What personal skills are required for successful shared leadership?
- What other factors are important?
- What are the barriers to effective shared leadership?
- What has been the impact of shared leadership within the team and beyond?
- What are the implications for others involved in leading partnership activities?

### **3. Establishing shared leadership**

You've got to get buy-in from headteachers, there's no question about that...that's the way it gets authority and credibility (Paul, facilitator).

In order to establish the Sectors, collaboration began at senior leadership level, based on a premise supported by Harris and Lambert, and Hargreaves. The philosophy was to bring senior leaders together to provide strategic direction for the project. This seems to be based on a model outlined in an NCSL discussion paper (2001), which proposes that collaborative leadership groups:

- need a common purpose and infrastructure
- will have to find ways to build trust and combine this with challenge
- should be externally facilitated
- should generate their own themes - arising from their concerns and need to build on shared learning and engage teams

Convincing headteachers to get involved in new initiatives can be a difficult process but in the case of Sector 3 one or two influential heads enabled this to happen quite quickly. The perceived reason for this 'buy-in' was explained by Ray,

Well I think we were fortunate in 3 in that... there were no competitive issues between the schools....I think also, there wasn't necessarily anyone dominant in personality, it was a genuine conglomeration of very different personalities but everybody saw each other's strengths. More important though, underlying it was a determination to make it work and I think why some of the other Sectors didn't take off so well was because not every head was committed to the idea in other Sectors or it was low down on their list of priorities so they were not giving it the time or the energy that the five within this Sector did.

External facilitation was provided by two experienced senior leaders during the formation and subsequent meetings of the leadership teams of each of the Sectors. The Sector 3 leadership team was initially made up of five headteachers (four male and

one female), the local authority adviser, two facilitators, one from the local authority and one from a private consultancy, and a male headteacher from the partner local authority. The headteachers and other senior leaders from the schools came to the collaborative with their own agenda, varying degrees of commitment and limited experience of working together. The group met regularly to establish the key objectives for the partnership. The research participants' recollection of these meetings was a significant feature of the interviews.

#### **4. Key research questions based on Lambert's model**

Lambert identifies six skills that leaders need for successful collaboration:

- shared purpose
- good communication
- adopting a constructivist approach to learning
- ability to facilitate group processes
- ability to mediate conflict
- an understanding of how change and transition affect people

The initial data generated for this study set out to test Lambert's framework against the experience of the research participants. These are addressed in turn below.

##### ***Shared purpose***

Given the diversity of schools and the range of partners involved in Sector 3, the development of a shared purpose is a nebulous concept. A shared purpose is about shared values, shared meanings, and shared approaches to the challenges faced. Mark, one of the facilitators described the early meetings of headteachers,

My recollections are about a highly able group of people coming together with a great deal of enthusiasm for working together, some scepticism about how it might work but generally very positive and wanting to engage with each other in a professional debate. They had by and large the same set of values... many of the schools had the same set of problems.

Establishing a protocol for collaboration was an essential element in the development of a shared purpose as Colin, deputy head at Beechwood, explained,

I think it's openness, trust, it's mutual respect that everybody's doing their damndest to get the best out of any situation they're in... there's nobody there for any easy ride, and there's nobody there being opportunist who isn't taking it seriously. I respect everybody in those teams; understand their motives, what they're about.

Paul described how focusing the work of the partnership also served to reinforce the shared sense of purpose,

I think there are two or three things that sort of came together. I think one was the notion that teaching and learning was at the heart of it and that's what we'd got to focus on.

One of the challenges for the partnership was how to differentiate the project for a mixed ability group of schools. It was important that the work of the partnership had a broad appeal that would engage all group members. Peter, deputy head at Longdale, explained how this was achieved,

We talked a similar language to OfSTED are talking now about moving people from satisfactory to good and good to very good or whatever. So we were all trying to move up a rung, so that's where we could do it together, where we could work together...because it wasn't that somebody was higher up than somebody else it was all after improvement and trying to differentiate it to meet the needs of the schools.

### ***Good communication***

It is often assumed that school leaders, and teachers in general, will be effective communicators. Although we do a lot of communicating, we do not always know whether or not this has been effective or spend much time considering how we might improve our communication skills. One of the themes I wanted to explore in this study was the role of the highest achieving school, Longdale, in a mixed-ability partnership. In some of the other Sectors, there appeared to be an issue over the commitment of the lead school, which had led to resentment from the other schools. In Sector 3 this did not seem to be the case.

Peter, deputy head at Longdale, confirmed that considerable discussion had been held between himself and Helen, the headteacher, about how to present the school to the rest of the Sector even down to rehearsing what might be said and how.

I think we always took the lead role...not in a 'you've got to learn from us' viewpoint at all, we never wanted that, but I was conscious that our input was quite crucial to this and the way that we conducted ourselves and the language we used was quite crucial. I wanted it to work... I mean, I passionately believe that working together is a good thing and, having come from different type of schools to this, I can see the advantages of different sorts of schools working together... so I was acutely aware, right from the outset, that it could easily fall down because Longdale could appear to be showing some sort of arrogance... that they knew it all and it was about them showing others the way. I never saw it was that at all...and I wanted to find a language that conveyed that.

### ***Adopting a constructivist approach to learning***

Constructivist leadership is a form of leadership which is about learning together and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively.

Harris and Lambert, 2003: 16

At the outset, although there was a shared purpose there was less clarity as to how this might be manifested in terms of work in schools with colleagues. Through co-construction the leaders were able to both share and extend their ideas and begin to devise some of the processes needed to move the project from the strategic to the operational; therefore having a direct impact on staff and students. There was also evidence of colleagues learning from and building on each other's ideas.

Peter explained how he felt leadership behaviour had evolved during the project, with group members starting to view things with 'collaborative eyes' and identify opportunities for strategies and ideas to be shared,

I think we've all grown in that sense... we've all felt our way into it and are much more ready to give and receive now...but what has coincided with that is people realising that they do have things to give... for example at Broadgreen, they're now only too willing to say, 'We've got a good idea, come and have look at this, we reckon this is working really well, we think you could learn from it...whereas they would have been very nervous to have said that in the initial days so that has evolved nicely.'

### ***Ability to facilitate group processes***

The role of facilitator for Sector 3 was initially shared by Paul an LA representative and Mark a representative from the private consultancy. Once appointed as co-ordinator of the project I took on this facilitation role. The importance of this facilitation was highlighted by all of the interviewees as a real strength in enabling the leadership group to function effectively. This was illustrated by Alan, headteacher at Denton,

The art of facilitating such a disparate group is far more difficult than it appears, I've done it before... a lot of leg work has to happen. I think it's their [ the facilitators] interpersonal skills to a large extent plus some vision as to end goals... as to what's possible.

Paul described the skills that were employed to ensure that the group functioned effectively,

We knew how to structure meetings...how to make conversation flow, we knew how to put a stop to conversations and debates that were becoming unhelpful without making people feel awkward. The management of the atmosphere in which {those first} meetings took place was absolutely crucial.

This was reinforced by Peter's description of some of the effective practice,

There's the simple stuff, which actually isn't that simple...which is about having an environment that was friendly, supportive, getting everybody together, there was that bit...so everybody actually enjoyed going to these meetings... that was crucial ....above all it's their ability, if you like, they're quite skilled at talking to people without it sounding condescending but challenging them at the same time, you know...and convincing people.

### ***Ability to mediate conflict***

Even with a group of like-minded professionals who had agreed a shared purpose and were committed to the idea of collaboration, it is inevitable that tensions will arise within the group. As one of the external facilitators to the project, Mark was in a favourable position to offer a perspective on how the group dealt with conflict when it presented itself.

There has been some robust debate at times in Sector 3, very robust debate. Where it's got a bit tense it's been where people haven't felt secure that intentions were honourable... In all cases they've been overcome by talking about it and allowing people to get things off their chest. People have become quite skilled at being able to mediate, being able to say I understand what you're saying - but on the other hand... I think that's part of what I mean about that culture, that atmosphere in which you can talk professionally and be secure in knowing that people aren't going to stamp their feet and walk out.

An example of conflict occurred during a discussion on the use of data across the partnership. There was clear support from a number of colleagues for the use of aggregated targets. However, this did not have the consensus of the group. The following is an extract of the debate which took place. The level of openness and honesty demonstrates some of the key principles of Sector 3. Helen, makes a

suggestion that collaborative target setting may serve to support some of the more vulnerable schools:

We can lean on the collaboration idea and I think that where we may have a school [within the Sector] that for whatever reason may struggle to get the floor targets, we can use that as an argument to say as a group, 'this is the progress we've made'.

Terry (headteacher in a school in partner local authority) agreed:

Absolutely excellent, because they're absolutes and ultimately we will be judged by absolutes whether we like it or not.

This is challenged by Peter, who clearly feels strongly about this issue and comfortable in raising his concerns with the rest of the group, even though he is in a minority.

Peter: I think...it's potentially going to create a blame culture where 'your school didn't'... we've all done really well and moved this, but 'your school didn't'... I can't see massive gains by doing it in the first place.

Rob: Well I think it's interesting. I have to say within the Sector I don't think the blame culture is an immediate problem.

Peter: I think there's the potential.

Rob: Yes, but speaking from a position of people whose data might not be at the cutting edge, I think people would welcome it, because the whole point of target setting is it should put everybody on their toes as it's based on prior performance...

Helen: Although we know individual schools are measured... we are serving the community where children move from schools and all sorts of things so it feels right philosophically to measure that improvement more across the community and to shelter in a way and to push the idea that we're not going to sideline one member.

This discourse reinforces that the strong values held by some key members of the group shaped the thinking and subsequent decisions that the group made. Ray explained how he felt conflict had been resolved,

There have been disagreements but they've mainly been worked out through consensus by people talking, I think people have compromised I think people have wanted the thing to work so the greater good has always triumphed over what an individual wants.

### ***Understanding of how change and transition affect people***

Of the six strands of Lambert's framework, it was most difficult to determine how much these leaders knew about the effects of change and transition on people and their organisations. There was clearly an expectation that the leaders would engage in collaboration and some acknowledgement from Paul about the shift in culture required,

Trust doesn't happen overnight and certainly not in an education system where people have been pitted against one another for quite a long time. The way in which I think

trust develops in situations like this is over time with people talking with one another in a professional way.

However, accepting that collaboration is an evolutionary process requiring a certain amount of patience is in direct conflict with the expectation from the outset of the project that collaboration needed to have a significant impact within the first year (the initial purpose of the collaboration was to affect the summer GCSE results). This dichotomy was expressed by Helen, who emphasised the importance of allowing trusting relationships to develop. It was implicit that the leaders were aware of the cultural shift required in their schools if the partnership was going to move from shared senior leadership to have an impact at other levels. However, the transient nature of staffing in some of the schools proved to be a factor in determining how quickly collaboration could be established at middle leader or teacher level,

....in certain schools or in certain departments where you had a lot of staff change it meant that people had to start again and re establish a relationship, because at the heart of collaboration is always this trust... (Helen).

It seems that with this group of schools the shared purpose was derived from a very strong and explicit set of values about education held by the leaders of some of those schools. These leaders seemed able to exert a level of influence over others with less strongly held beliefs resulting in a sense of altruism permeating many of the decisions taken about the strategic direction of the partnership.

The understanding of the potential damage to the partnership of presenting the role of the highest attaining school in a superior or condescending way was extremely valuable and would seem to be a key point in securing the commitment of colleagues, particularly in the less successful schools.

Leadership learning has been critical to the success of Sector 3. It has allowed participants to share their thinking and expect to be both supported and challenged by others in the group. This was highly valued by members of the leadership team and seen as a vital component in enabling the project to take shape in the initial stages.

Although group processes were formally facilitated, group members were clearly aware of how to work effectively together. The lack of dominance of any particular member; an acknowledgement of the strengths of individuals; the respect shown for the role and work of other group members, together with a commitment for the partnership have enabled the project to take shape.

A range of emotional intelligences were displayed by the group in responding sensitively to each others' views. The leaders demonstrate a high level of 'social competencies' and are able to manage conflict when it occurs. The underlying commitment to the project, which had been gained at the outset, meant that the desire of the group to make the collaboration a success was stronger than the objections of particular individuals. The reconciliation of alternative viewpoints allowed the project to move forward, as individuals could see that some decisions were 'for the greater good' and were willing and able to compromise.

## Research outcomes

The six factors outlined by Lambert on the skills required by leaders for successful collaboration concentrate largely on the personal qualities and competencies of leaders. During this research, a number of other factors emerged from the data as being important for the development of effective shared leadership. By using grounded theory to investigate some of the comments made by previous interviewees, I was able to begin construction of a framework for shared leadership which included additional strands. These additional strands are to do with the structures and contexts of shared leadership. I have combined these with the Lambert model to create the following framework.

### Framework for developing effective shared leadership

Personal conditions	Structural conditions	Contextual conditions
Ability to facilitate group processes	Additional funding; Leadership Incentive Grant and Leading Edge Partnership monies	Support of the local authority; willingness to work creatively and allow autonomy of partnerships
Good communication skills	Strategic co-ordination; appointing a co-ordinator with school leadership experience	Involvement of partner organisations; DfES, private consultant, partner LA etc
Ability to develop a shared purpose	Tiered leadership structure*; strategic group of HTs; operational group of DHTs	Education policy underpinned by collaborative activities; Excellence in Cities
Ability to mediate conflict	Informed external facilitation; high quality input from experienced and respected colleagues	Strategic initiatives which require shared working arrangements, eg federations, 14 -19 consortia.
Adopting a constructive perspective to adult learning; acknowledge that leaders learn from each other	Flexibility, differentiation and ownership; based on the needs of the schools	
Understanding of how change and transition affect people		

The framework is explored in detail in the following section.

\*Tiered leadership was a concept developed during the study and is discussed in more detail later.

### 1. Structural factors that enabled effective shared leadership in Sector 3

Following the establishment of the Sectors in November 2002 the Sector held its first leadership planning day in June 2003.

We need to have a coherent vision for this Sector...what does the Sector look like in terms of structure? What are the structures and processes that are happening? What would you want people to be saying about the work? [Paul]



This was followed by a discussion about what the group was trying to achieve, the progress that had been made so far and what more needed to be done to enable even greater success. This was encapsulated by Helen,

I mean one of the things that I think is fundamental, that I'd like to see at the end of it [is] that we'd be able to say what structures you need to support this sort of work...it's got to be easy at the end of the day.

### ***Enhancing leadership capacity through additional funding***

...we needed the skills to keep the senior leadership teams working together, facilitating that process...but we also needed the skills to support our ambition which was to move it down the ladder; to get collaboration happening at classroom level... so someone that's got the time, the capacity to work with teachers, get teachers together, {to} address what ever it is. [Peter]

Additional funding was made available through the introduction of the Leadership Incentive Grant (LIG). This was subsequently enhanced by Leading Edge Partnership funding. Collaboration was one of the cornerstones of the LIG and Sector 3 agreed that the schools contribute a percentage of their funding to a partnership budget. Only four of the schools were able to do this as the fifth had a deficit budget. Despite their lack of financial contribution the other four schools insisted that the fifth school had full access to the activities being undertaken by the partnership. The financial generosity of the other four schools was seen by the fifth school as a key signifier of the intentions of the group,

It's very unusual for schools to do anything like that, on that sort of scale and, from our point of view, that is still probably the single most remarkable thing about this Sector, that we were involved in it because of the other schools. [Rob]

From their own LIG funding, four of the schools provided additional non-contact time for middle leaders to undertake a much sharper quality assurance, coaching and mentoring role with their teams. The schools' contribution to a shared budget enabled a range of professional development activities and resources to be funded. The leadership team agreed to fund a co-ordinator and administrator for the Sector, in addition to paying staff to attend twilight INSET. The impact of the funding cannot be underplayed. It is seen as one of the key levers in moving the partnership forward.

Without the funding attached none of this would have happened because that would have been the barrier...what this project has been about is trying to overcome some of those barriers. [Peter]

It could be argued that, on its own, the funding would not have made a significant difference. When added to the other factors it was a catalyst that enabled the leadership team to realise some of their ambitions.

### ***Strategic co-ordination***

There have been certain structures and processes that we've put in place that we feel have really been helpful to the collaboration. First of all, early on we set up the post of co-ordinator because we were fairly clear that we would not be able to support or have

the capacity to support the partnership from the management teams without that help.  
[Helen]

The decision to appoint a full-time co-ordinator to lead the work of the project was based on the prior experience of group members who had been involved in TVEI and Education Action Zones, both of which had co-ordination. It was a bold decision; none of the other Sectors went down this route initially. The group discussed the remit and responsibility of the co-ordinator and decided to appoint someone at senior leadership level who could provide strategic input to the work of the partnership. The participants of the study emphasised the importance of the role; it served to cement the relationships between the group members involved in the recruitment process in addition to providing a focus for collaboration.

I don't think it would have happened at all without a co-ordinator. The example of other Sectors bears that out. It's time isn't it? It's somebody who can take the spirit of what's gone on in a meeting and make it work. Heads can't do that, nor can you spare time in your schools to do it and it needs one person, you can't have a group of five people doing it; it just doesn't work. [Ray]

### ***Tiered leadership structure***

At the outset, the leadership group worked together to drive the partnership forward. This meant half-termly meetings for the headteachers, with other school leaders attending where appropriate. Helen described the process,

We set up a strategic group and that strategic group consisted of the headteachers but we also felt that we would need another key member in each management team who would drive the partnership forward on a day to day basis.

It soon became apparent that the driving force behind the partnership was not the heads but the senior leaders with responsibility for partnership work in each of the schools. Twelve months into the partnership, a decision was taken to establish a second tier of leadership, at school co-ordinator level. Whilst the strategic group of headteachers met termly, the co-ordinators' group met half-termly and this is where the strategic plans were translated into action. As a consequence of the frequency of meetings and the consistency of membership, the relationship and connectedness between the members, this group has remained a key facet to the success of Sector 3. When describing their meetings, those interviewed expressed a genuine appreciation of the input of the other group members.

I think the relationship is very strong, a strong bond now between the people... very mutually supportive, people clearly like each other and enjoy being there... they're all very different but value each others' input and part in it. [There's] no hierarchy, in terms of people working from different schools together at leadership level, it's the strongest model I've ever seen. [Peter]

Although the strategic and operational groups have different functions, it was essential that a symbiotic relationship existed between them and that, at times, the group met together as a larger forum. The relationship between the groups is described by Rob,

I just think the heads are very supportive but a bit distant and preoccupied ...the co-ordinators will get on with it which is quite good. I think the co-ordinators thing is, is it more important? [than the strategic group] It is on a day-to-day basis but then again if the heads weren't going to sign the cheques I suppose, or whatever it is, the rest of it collapses.

### ***Informed external facilitation***

The role of facilitator in this study went beyond the 'ability to facilitate group processes' from Lambert's framework. Those interviewed felt there were two features of Mark and Paul's facilitation that were crucial to their success. Firstly, that they were external to the partnership and, secondly, that they were able to bring knowledge and experience to the role. This illustrates the importance of 'informed facilitation' that goes beyond the organisational and into the area of strategic development, enabling the partnership to test out their ideas with an objective audience.

To have some people there of the calibre of Mark and Paul who could first of all lead and then extract from that the next step was important, and they did it well and they complemented each other...what they also brought was a wider dimension because they were working with similar things in other parts of the country. [Ray]

### ***Flexibility and differentiation***

At the start of the partnership, the perception of the leadership team was that collaboration needed to involve all five schools, all of the time. It became clear quite early on that this model was not going to enable some of the intended outcomes as some schools were not in a position to fully engage with partnership activities. Rather than spending time and energy bringing all colleagues on board, the leadership team devised a framework for the development of a series of focused projects, some driven from the leadership group, others led by interested colleagues.

We had to learn a lot about how you can actually collaborate effectively and after trying a variety of things out we came on a project approach where we looked at setting up projects some which could be very big some could be very small but that meant that staff could buy in at all sorts of different levels and it gave us enormous flexibility to take the whole thing forward and also to respond to a variety of changes that would be happening external to the partnership. [Helen]

This approach secured teacher ownership and paid real dividends for Sector 3; it is regarded as exemplar practice both within and beyond the partnership.

It's a model for what should be done nationally, it's about respecting teachers professionalism, giving them some room to breathe, not having a clipboard behind them every ten seconds; we assume they're interested in the subject and interested in improving. [Rob]

## **2. Contextual factors that enabled effective shared leadership in Sector 3**

It was clear at an early stage of the partnership that the collaboration agenda would only be successful if the context in which the collaborative was trying to work was supportive of the concept. The political climate and the changing nature of the

relationship between the local authority and schools provided a level of autonomy and ownership over the project which was particularly helpful.

### ***Support of the local authority***

Paul gave his perception of the climate at the time,

The LEA leadership was completely committed to the notion of empowering the collaboratives to drive their own agenda. A lot of schools didn't believe that but I can tell you it was absolutely the case.

At one of the early leadership planning sessions Mark outlined the changing role of the local authority,

We're trying to do a bit of re-engineering here on the relationships between schools...and between schools and the LEA because I think that is what 's happening. The LEA's giving us permission to do that so that's all right but equally the LEA needs to have a discussion about what this re-engineering means for the LEA and I don't think we should underestimate how radical all this stuff could be over the next two or three years.

The autonomy provided by devolved funding and a supportive local authority were significant factors in establishing effective collaboration. However, it would appear that schools wanted the LEA to retain the responsibility for monitoring and evaluating school performance. The Sector 3 leaders were happy to provide the 'support' to each other but less inclined to provide the 'challenge'. This indicates that the peer evaluation and collective accountability built into the LIG evaluation cycle at the outset were incongruous with the headteachers' perception of the purpose of collaboration. There was a view that headteachers needed external challenge and that this was unlikely to be provided by the collaborative,

What we do need is people like Kathy (strategy manager), people like John, people who are outside of our schools to be constantly making us feel uncomfortable about what we're doing and moving us on. [Ray]

It was interesting to note that once the peer evaluation process had been set up it was appreciated by the heads, as Ray explained,

It was more than just heads getting along... it was actually being critical friends to each other and it was a professional dialogue. You meet heads and sometimes the reality of their schools is very different to the way you think their schools are when you meet the head. But that allowed us to get under the skin of each other's schools.

There were mixed perceptions within the local authority conversation about the role and remit of the Sectors. On the one hand their appeared to be a desire to 'liberate' headteachers from their reliance on the local authority, which would be good preparation for the New Relationship with Schools agenda. On the other hand, the local authority wanted to influence the Sectors' agenda.

I think unknown to them they released a mechanism through this project which came as a surprise to some officers... there was a degree of autonomy and the LEA is a support

vehicle for schools and headteachers who wish to collaborate rather than the collaborative being an instrument by which the LEA can do things unto schools. [Alan]

Initially, the Local Authority envisaged the Sectors as a way in to influence a range of functions provided by schools. This was quickly averted by the leadership group who were keen to retain their autonomy and focus on the Sector's key objectives.

One of the things that we did resist was too much involvement from the LEA and them dictating to us how we would work and what our priorities would be and so on. It was one of the things we had to be strong about, and keep saying no, these are our priorities, this is why we're working together, this is what we're trying to achieve... we don't want to do that. I mean there was stuff about admissions, stuff about exclusions and all that sort of stuff...we saw that, rightly or wrongly, as interference and the LEA trying to control our agenda which we weren't having because we wanted it to be about teaching and learning. [Peter]

### ***Links with partner organisations; the DfES, partner local authority and private consultant***

The involvement of the DfES was instigated by the urgent need to improve the outcomes at KS4 in the local authority. They were looking for rapid cycle improvement where interventions were used to target the Year 11 cohort and impact on the percentage of 5 A\*-C results that summer. The partner authority and private consultant presented a bid to the DfES and local authority representatives and were given an initial contract for the work. Although the impact of these partners on the success of the shared leadership was not seen as particularly significant by the school leaders, much of the 'behind the scenes' activity was undertaken by them and in the earliest stages they played a critical part in establishing a platform for success. Some of the school leaders were sceptical about the involvement of a private consultant but welcomed the skills and experience that Mark brought. The local authority had a clear commitment to engaging with the private partner, as Mark explained,

I was also simultaneously working with another LEA on a similar project but a very different sort of LEA ...so it was fascinating to see how the dynamic between the public and the private worked. In one case the public welcomed the private, in the other case the public was resistant to the private and the difference was just stark in terms of their effectiveness and how things were able to have an impact or not have an impact.

A less important but still influential role was played by the link headteacher, which worked particularly effectively in Sector 3 as compared to the other Sectors as Paul explained,

*I think in Sector 3 it worked best because the link head is a very affable bloke whom everybody liked. He's got great expertise, great enthusiasm for working collaboratively, good interpersonal skills and he enjoyed being part of the project and really added to those meetings.*

The leaders agreed with this assessment and, although none of them felt it was an essential feature of enabling shared leadership, they highlighted the value of both the objectivity and experience that the link headteacher brought to the group.

I think somebody who's from a different LEA was good because again, they've got no baggage, they could say what they like because we wouldn't know any different... [Peter]

### ***Education policy that supported collaboration between schools***

In the past ten years, a number of national initiatives have been established, based on the concept of collaboration as it has become clear through the research of Fullan (2001), Hopkins (2001), Harris (2002) and Hargreaves (2003) that schools working in partnership have a much greater chance of achieving sustainable improvement than those working in isolation. The government have used this research evidence as an opportunity to introduce an ever-growing plethora of groups for schools to work in, or with: Networked Learning Communities; Education Action Zones; Excellence Clusters; LIG collaboratives; Creative Partnerships; Raising Achievement Networks; Leading Edge Partnerships and Education Improvement Partnerships. These all depend on the ability of the participating organisations to work effectively with their partners.

The backdrop of competition between schools still exists but this is not seen as mutually exclusive to collaboration. In fact, the most successful schools usually have a wider remit (and additional funding), eg Leading Edge 'Lead Schools', to support their less effective partners. This has brought about a culture shift in some schools to look beyond their own skills and expertise and towards other schools for exemplar practice. Current legislation heralds a significant change in the way that schools work with their partners. The Every Child Matters agenda places an emphasis on schools being able to work in partnership with other providers of children's services such as Health, Social Services, and Youth and Community. The New Relationship with Schools sees the monitoring and evaluation role of the local authority diminish to be replaced with School Improvement Partners; colleague headteachers taking on the adviser mantle.

### ***Initiatives which require shared working arrangements***

Some of the most recent Government initiatives, such as the development of the 14-19 agenda, require collaboration across the education sector and between education, industry and other organisations. For future 14-19 provision to be really effective, schools will need to work with other providers to plan and deliver a range of learning opportunities for which their teachers may not have the necessary skills or time. Schools will need to forge effective links with those in the workplace and the Further Education sector to give their students the full entitlement of both vocational and academic courses.

This set of structural and contextual factors had an impact on the effectiveness of shared leadership and, although some of them are particular to Sector 3, there are elements that are replicable. The links with external partners were not seen as fundamental by the research participants; however, the involvement of highly experienced leaders did enhance the work of Sector 3. It enabled the group to hear objective opinions from informed colleagues to help guide their initial decision-making. These agendas rely on the ability and motivation of school leaders to engage with partnership work and indicate a fundamental change in the way that leaders operate. The experience of the Sector 3 leaders should provide them with the skills, knowledge and understanding to participate in and positively contribute to this new context.

## Impact of shared leadership; on the leaders and the schools

Sector 3 was seen, at least in the initial stages of the project, to have the most effective and well-functioning shared leadership. This successful start has been built upon and of the four original sectors it remains the only one continuing to function as a partnership. Once the LIG funding has finished four of the schools will contribute further funding from their own budgets to enable further partnership work.

There was a determination I think to make it work. I think respect was there, people respected each other's schools and each other as individuals and what they were trying to do. You never felt at those meetings that one school was trying to score points or say it was doing something better than somebody else and that was important. I think the spirit was one of 'we're trying to do something quite unusual and quite difficult here, but let's have a go at trying to do it'. [Ray]

The shared leadership of Sector 3 has been successful; as demonstrated by the evidence of improvement, particularly in the more challenging schools. By 2006: three of the schools had successfully applied for Specialist Status; all schools were above the DfES floor targets at GCSE; no school was in an Ofsted category and three schools had achieved their best ever results the previous year. Helen describes the way in which the commitment of senior leadership has permeated the culture of each of the schools.

We're very proud of the fact that we've actually created a genuine partnership where we're able to trust each other and the management teams of all five schools have been able to enter into a dialogue where we're not just interested in the partnership but the parts as well and out of that has grown a whole range of initiatives where staff at all levels in each school have been able to benefit and take their learning forward.

The leadership group were able to quickly decide the focus and direction for their work and began to plan for the medium rather than just the short term.

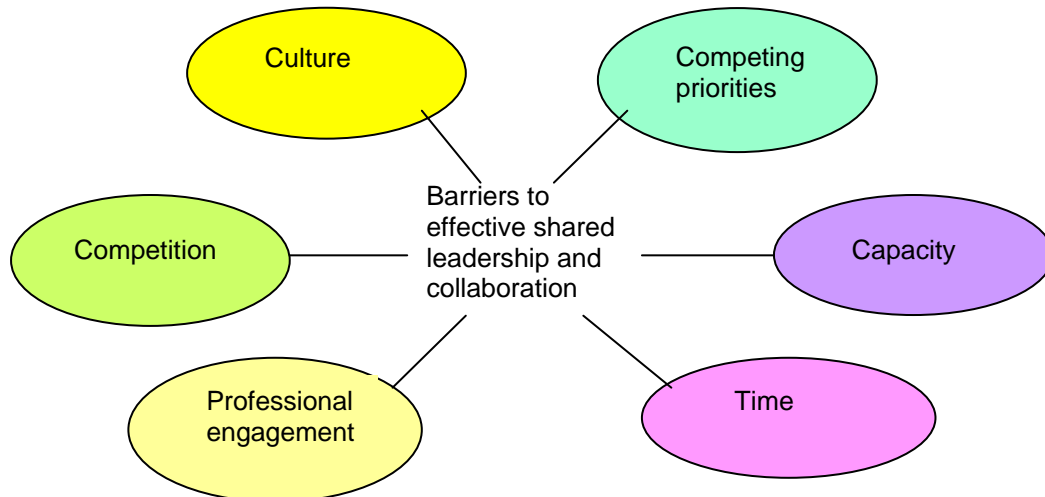
To have anything that works for three years and doesn't get knocked off course at sometime because other things happen is pretty unusual really. I think it worked because it was based in teaching and learning, this very heavy focus on that, which is something that all schools always are trying to improve on. So that was its strength. I think three years is as much as you can plan for anything these days. [Ray]

It is important to consider some of the reasons for this. There were some consistent features in the establishment of the four Sectors, these were; the external facilitation, meeting structures, input from the local authority and funding. The variables were based around the personnel involved. A different local authority officer and a different headteacher from the partner authority were attached to each group. Each collaborative contained a different group of headteachers with a different set of histories, bringing a range of personal and social competencies to the partnership. In Sector 3, a close professional relationship developed between the groups of leaders over the course of the project. Hopefully, this experience will inform the contribution that each of the leaders makes to future partnerships.

If we did it again it would happen quicker because we've learned things along the way. I mean, none of us were experienced, had expertise... as you say it was cutting edge stuff really...we were feeling our way, finding our way a bit... [Peter]

## Barriers to effective shared leadership and collaboration

The diagram below represents the main reasons given as barriers to shared leadership to and collaboration between schools by the participants in the study. Some of the barriers existed for senior leaders whilst others were problematic for colleagues at other levels in the schools, limiting their involvement in collaborative activities.



### 1. Competing priorities

One of the difficulties encountered by the leaders was how to manage the vast array of initiatives that came into each school.

The fact that outside school, things are changing all the time... we're having a raft of government initiatives so as well as each school having its own dynamic of change you have to build in a flexibility to take both elements of change on board. [Helen]

It was recognised that there needed to be an element of flexibility and understanding from the leaders which allowed the particular circumstances that existed in some of the schools to take priority and collaboration to take a backseat.

Different schools, different situation, different circumstances, Ofsted comes over the horizon and you've simply got to change your focus and you hope the people in the team and the collaborative understand that. [Colin]

The local authority did not seem entirely comfortable with the Sectors at times. At one point there was a move to re-organise them on the basis of geography; a move that was vigorously resisted by Sector 3. The autonomy of the Sectors to pursue their own agenda, which was initially a strength, became a barrier as it meant the local authority had to find alternative ways of moving their agenda forward. This inevitably created tensions, which have been difficult to resolve.

I think the LEA's role in this has been really interesting and I think they'd probably say the same thing. They went from being almost the instigators of it really because of the imperative to improve quickly. So they went from there to wondering what monster they'd set up... I think just at the point when, if you were going to make Sectors work,



with a bit of extra oomph from the LEA it could have really taken off and been the main way of delivering LEA work in the city it didn't happen, and that's because of the worry about the other partnerships\*. [Ray]

\*This refers to new Education Improvement Partnerships and 14 -19 area groupings.

## **2. Capacity**

If you're working in schools facing challenging circumstances, you're under the cosh and to take more time out to go to meetings... collaboration is resources hungry as we all have said, it takes time... and for some schools it's very hard to give people time away from the frontline to engage in collaborative activity. [Paul]

Two of the Sector schools were facing challenging circumstances and one was in special measures at the start of the project. This meant that the capacity of these schools to engage with external partners was limited; one school was involved in eight different partnerships.

We have to be realistic to see that there's a lot of things we're trying to follow through and there's a lot of practical things as well and we might need to adjust plans as we go along because if you've got lots of staff going out and bringing all sorts of different things in, you can only harness a certain number of things at one time in your school. [Helen]

The transient nature of staffing in some of the schools meant that experienced and established colleagues needed to spend time inducting and supporting new staff; although this turnover was not at senior leader level, it did limit the capacity of senior leaders to be involved in initiatives outside of their own school.

## **3. Time**

The 'busyness' of teachers' lives, the demands imposed upon them which therefore means that they're working flat out. [Colin]

There was an acknowledgement that many teachers were working extremely hard on their own school agenda and that, at times, collaboration meant extra pressure rather than extra support. To overcome this, the shared leadership tried to maximise the time available by creating common closure days, calendared meetings and making payments for twilight sessions.

Time is an important element because in all schools staff are extremely busy and we had to find creative ways of making time for staff to get together and to share their ideas. [Helen]

However, this did not overcome the negative mindset of some staff towards working with colleagues from other schools.

## **4. Professional engagement**

Those interviewed were reluctant to criticise the teachers who did not engage with collaborative activity although they recognised that not all colleagues had the mindset needed to work effectively with partner schools.

You've got to have a certain kind of teacher that wants to go out and meet with other people and you've got to push that all the time. This isn't a criticism of teachers but to get teachers beyond their own school and own department is a barrier. [Ray]

Enabling teachers to move beyond their own circumstances and context whilst maintaining professional respect for colleagues in other schools was seen as something that did not always happen,

To work in this way you need to be able to professionally listen and professionally respond and just occasionally that doesn't happen as much as you'd like it to. And once you've got some of that going on in these groups... everybody shuts down as the trust goes, the feeling of security disappears and people can't contribute in an open and honest way. [Mark]

There can be bits of history that get in the way because nobody comes with a blank sheet do they? We know that over previous years, decades, there have been histories between people or schools that can sometimes get in the way. [Paul]

Throughout the project the level of engagement in collaboration was greater from senior leaders than from staff at other levels in the schools. This could be due to a number of factors: the professional skills of those involved; the investment of time in the initial stages and access to the 'bigger picture', which gave collaboration greater meaning and purpose for those sharing the leadership of the project.

## **5. Competition**

The Sectors were established against a backdrop of competition which had taken place between schools for the previous 10 to 15 years. Although the schools in Sector 3 were not in direct competition with each other for students there were elements of this historical context that had not been eliminated. This was interpreted by some of the leaders as a combination of the competitiveness engendered by the production of league tables and the attitudes of colleagues towards staff from other schools. As Rob suggests,

I'll give the answer that nobody wants, which is [that] the ultimate barrier is league tables. Then there's territory, there's department cliqueness, school cliqueness. Fear of strangers, xenophobia, you name it they're all there aren't they? Then you do have these little sub cultures, don't you?"

## **6. Culture**

The idea of xenophobia acting as a barrier to collaboration was taken further by Mark.

The biggest barrier would be the attitude to the whole concept of collaboration held by some key people, that's the biggest barrier isn't it? I don't think, this is getting a bit philosophical, but I don't think it's even within the British psyche. I think we are more a group of quirky individualists actually, we go very collaborative when threatened, to national security or whatever, but our own natural inclination is, within our own boundaries, to be quite individualistic.

The shared leadership group tried to work pragmatically to overcome as many of the identified barriers as they could; exemplified by the creative use of time. The most difficult barriers to overcome were those around attitude, culture and professional engagement. In the end, the most productive method was to work initially with those who were most willing and build in flexibility to involve others at a later stage.

## Conclusion

This is a small case study of the leaders of five secondary schools and other partners sharing the leadership of a school improvement project. Those interviewed place a significant emphasis on interpersonal factors and their comments suggest that personal qualities are important to peoples' ability to work collaboratively. Those elements which are the conditions or levers to success can conversely become the barriers to success if they are absent. It is less clear whether the participants believe that these skills were already present in the Sector 3 leadership team or whether some of this effective behaviour has been learned through participation in the process of shared leadership. Although Goleman's term 'emotional intelligence' is not used directly by the research participants, there are myriad references to interpersonal skills. The data from this small study provides some insight into the process of enabling successful collaborative leadership. Goleman's work becomes more significant when we consider his assertion that,

Emotional intelligence competencies are not innate talents, but learned abilities, each of which has a unique contribution of making leaders more resonant and therefore more effective. (2002:38)

As the project progressed, there were clear indications of changes in behaviour of those involved in the shared leadership and some evidence to suggest that there were active attempts to frame their inputs and responses to each other in order to enable the group to function.

In terms of barriers, the respondents did not cite external factors such as the pressure to meet performance targets or an unwillingness to conform to the principles of collaboration as barriers. This may have been as a result of the questions posed not being probing enough (see appendix 2). It could have been because my very appointment to lead the project was a result of their collective decision that such a post was required. Therefore, they could not be seen to disagree with collaboration. These issues highlight some of the difficulties facing a practitioner researcher conducting research in her own work environment. What is clear is that those interviewed felt that the greatest barriers to collaboration were more about philosophical impediments. I would also propose that, at least in the initial stages, it was helpful that schools were not formally accountable for each others' performance as this would have been a significant obstacle to overcome.

The way in which the headteachers initially involved in the project were able to work together provided a good model for the development of collaboration at other levels across the partnership. They were able to share leadership within the group and began to distribute leadership of the project to others within the leadership team of their own schools. However, despite the headteachers promoting the principles and being clear about the *why* and *what* of collaboration, they had limited understanding of the *how*. Even at the end of the first two years of the project, the ability to collaborate effectively was still mainly located with a small number of senior leaders. This indicates the limited understanding of how to distribute this shared leadership to other levels within and across the partnership.

According to Harris and Muijs (2002) in a review of the teacher leadership research for NCSL, the notion of distributed leadership is well developed in the USA, Canada and Australia, but not in Britain where hierarchical leadership structures are predominant. Research by, MacBeath (1998), Lambert and Hargreaves, shows that teacher

leadership is a major force in affecting school improvement. Harris and Muijs (op cit) quote work by Leithwood and Jantzi (1998) 'who conclude that teacher leadership has far more impact on student learning than 'principal leadership' (2002:3). This presents a new set of challenges not just around 'how do we successfully collaborate at senior leadership level' but how can we replicate that process throughout the school(s)?

If we concur with the notion of emotional intelligence as learned behaviour then the implication is that we need to teach leaders to be emotionally intelligent in order to undertake their role as lead learners in collaboration. However, if we look at the findings of this study there are a more significant set of learning needs around how to build the capacity of colleagues to collaborate. It is only by engaging staff at all levels with the process of collaboration that we can maximise the potential impact on schools and conclude that it is in this area that the work from the project needs to have real significance.

The Lambert framework provided a way in to the research and a clear understanding of the personal competencies required by leaders to undertake collaboration. The process of data generation enabled the leaders to reflect on the effective practice that had evolved during the project. The structural and contextual factors identified as part of the framework for effective shared leadership emerged from the data. These are an indication that the way in which different aspects of the framework interrelate provides a complex picture of the evolving landscape which is collaboration. In isolation, each of the factors; personal, structural and contextual, are important. Combined, they provide an understanding of how we might make collaboration work by identifying those aspects of the framework that are replicable and overcoming those factors that act as a barrier to progress.

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## **Appendix**

### **Semi-structured interview questions**

1. Could you talk through the process of the Sectors being formed?
2. What are your early recollections of meetings with the group of leaders that formed the collaborative leadership team?
3. Did you see any particular people as key in driving things forward, and what did they do?
4. Can you share some of the key moments that you feel 'well, that was a real turning point' for the group?
5. Were there tensions in Sector 3? How were they overcome?
6. How do you feel about the notion of shared responsibility?
7. How do you see the role of the LEA in all this?
8. Do you see any tension there between the roles of particular people in the collaborative?
9. Do you feel that everybody had the opportunity to make an equal contribution?
10. Was facilitation an important factor?
11. What about the co-ordinator role?
12. What about the role of the partner LEA, particularly the role of the HT that was linked?
12. What do you see as the barriers to collaboration?
13. Do you feel progress has been made over the last three years, and if so how?