Leadership Development and Professional Learning in SESP

SELF Conference Paper (Workshop A)

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1.   Background

1.1   This paper is concerned with the leadership and professional development issues generated by the Shared Education Signature Programme (SESP). The SESP seeks to achieve the following outcomes:

I.   Improved educational outcomes and enhanced access to the curriculum for all pupils involved in shared education.
II.   Normalised peer-to-peer cross community relationships built through regular contact within mainstream education.
III.   Education and Training Inspectorate incorporates shared education as a component part of regular inspection process in schools.
IV.   Shared education becomes a core element of all schools' strategic and operational activities.

1.2   The focus of this paper is upon the development and support needs that arise from expanding the programme's current focus on meaningful shared contact between peer groups within school partnerships to encompass the broader school improvement opportunities presented by partnership working.

1.3   The paper draws on the comments and feedback of school leaders who took part in two workshops at the SELF conference 'Shared Education - The Difference We Can Make'. The workshops were based around leaders mapping the existing leadership structures and professional learning activities in their partnerships and considering how these needed to develop over the next two years in order to accommodate a more sustained focus upon school improvement.

1.4   The outcomes from the workshop are set against the back drop of the earlier report on the overarching CPD issues involved in developing SESP within the context of a self improving system[1] and the recent publication of the Teacher Professional Learning Strategy[2] with its vision for the future of teachers' professional learning within NI. The nature of leadership required by a self-improving systems discussed in this paper draws upon the experience of leaders in other collaborative systems, the existing knowledge base concerning effective

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[1] Hadfield, M. and Knox, C. (2016) Continuing Professional Development: Self Improving School Systems
[2] Department of Education (2016) Learning Leaders: A Strategy for Teacher Professional Learning. Department for Education. Northern Ireland

school to school working[3], collaborative CPD[4], and research on system leadership and school networks[5].

2. Professional development and school improvement in a self-improving system

2.1 The Department of Education, the Education Authority (the implementing body for shared education) and Atlantic Philanthropies have been engaged in discussions on how best to deliver the continuing professional development (CPD) element of the Shared Education Signature Programme. There is considerable congruence between the Department of Education's implementation strategy for the *Teacher Professional Learning Strategy*, specifically its emphasis on building capacity through collaborative practice to create a self-sustaining system of professional learning, and the direction of travel of the SESP.

2.2 The current attempts to build a collaborative school-led system in NI will have profound implications for the nature of the CPD required within the SESP, particularly in terms of leaders development. Hargreaves (2012) describes a SIS in the following way:

> A self-improving system is one in which school improvement and professional development are conjoined in the life and work of a school in relations to its chosen partners[6].

For Hargreaves the 'conjoining' of CPD and school improvement does not involve making the former subordinate to latter, rather the process of school improvement, based upon inquiry and joint practice development, within partnerships and collaborative networks, increasingly becomes the 'professional development'. A radical re-think prompted by concerns over the relative ineffectiveness of 'traditional' CPD courses in bringing about effective changes in classrooms. The prevalence of inquiry-based approaches to professional learning in the most improved education systems[7] reflects growing confidence in leaders' and teachers' capacity

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[3] Hadfield M. and Chapman, C. (2009) *Leading school-based networks*: London: Routledge

Chapman, C. Muijs, D. and McAllister, J. (2012) *Collaborative school turnaround: A study of the impact of federation on pupil outcomes*. Nottingham: NCSL

[4] Cordingley P, Bell M, Rundell B, Evans D (2003) *The impact of collaborative CPD on classroom teaching and learning.* In: *Research Evidence in Education Library*. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education

[5] Hargreaves, D. H. (2012). *A self-improving school system: towards maturity*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.

[6] Hargreaves, D. H. (2012b). *A self-improving school system in international context*. Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.

[7] Barber, M. Chijoke, M. and Mourshed, M. (2010) How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better. London: McKinsey & Company.

to lead on improvements in teaching and learning that result in school and system level improvements.

2.4   In a self-improving system, control and responsibility for school improvement are devolved to the local level 'in a spirit of mutual aid between school leaders and their colleagues, who are morally committed to imaginative and sustainable ways of achieving more ambitious and better outcomes'. The system aims to improve the collective good of schools and is characterized by reciprocal knowledge transfer and joint practice development. School leaders and teachers move beyond the learning and practice confines of their own schools and become engaged in collaborative efforts to promote system wide improvements.

2.5   The use of the term professional learning in this paper, rather than CPD, is used as a SIS envisages all levels of a system being involved in co-regulated learning and inquiry into what is happening to, and being provided for, the pupils they are responsible for[8]. In a school led system school leaders and teachers make the decisions about what is being learnt, and by whom, as based upon the needs of their learners. It is a learning system marked by mutual accountability for ensuring the effectiveness and appropriateness of the support on offer to teachers and leaders. What constituents 'improvement' is informed not only by research and evidence but reflects the values of those involved, including the communities being served.

3.   Leadership within a self-improving system

3.1   Within school the main leadership challenges are in creating the conditions and structures that support inquiry based approaches to school improvement and developing the leadership capacity of the teams and individuals involved. In addition school leaders need to develop their strategic use of existing collaborative improvement initiatives, broker access for their staff to external networks, and balance their engagement in developing school-led improvement systems and structures with the need to develop capacity in their own schools. The capacity building required to create a SIS in Northern Ireland therefore has to take place at five interconnected levels: the individual, teams within schools, the whole school, partnerships, and in networks of schools.

3.2   School leaders in a SIS need to engage in forms of instructional, or pedagogical leadership,[9] that focus upon establishing positive professional learning cultures, in enhancing the quality

8 Timperley, H.S. (2011) Realizing the power of professional learning. London: Open University Press.
[9] Robinson, V. M. J., Hohepa, M., & Lloyd, C. A. (2009). School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works and why [Best evidence synthesis]. Wellington: New Zealand Ministry of Education.

of professional learning, and in generating collective responsibility for improvement within their schools. Developing a SIS requires[10] the development of distributed system leadership across multiple interconnected professional learning communities within and between schools.

3.3   The development of distributed system leadership requires cross-school structures and processes that supports leaders at all levels provide moral and practical leadership beyond the confines of their schools[11]. Teacher leadership within local networks of professional learning communities (PLCs), have become a feature of a number of education systems[12]. School leaders are therefore at the core of a SIS as they are both the gatekeepers and orchestrators of the capacity required for it to develop and flourish.

4.   The development of the SESP school improvement agenda

4.1   At the SELF conference in November 2016 a group of some twenty school leaders, were asked, over two workshops, to consider how they might develop their current partnerships in order to meet the school improvement aims of the SESP. The workshops focused on two elements of current partnerships:

- Leaders at all levels and leadership structures
- Professional learning processes and structures

4.2   The workshops began with brief assessments of partnerships current engagement in professional development. The majority of leaders indicated that they had started to share key learnings from their partnership working beyond those staff directly involved.   Very few of the leaders indicated that they had as yet initiated formal collaborative professional development activities around the wider school improvement benefits that had arisen from their partnerships. The general consensus of this group of leaders was that they intended over the next two years to develop the school improvement focus of their collaborative working.

4.3   There was strong support for utilising the collaborative possibilities of SESP to improve educational outcomes but concerns were raised that this did not result in a narrow and prescriptive focus upon key subjects and a limited set of pupil outcomes. The school leaders

Day, C. and Sammons, P. (2013) Successful leadership: a review of the international literature . CfBT. Reading
[10] OECD (2016) What makes a school a learning organisation? OECD. Paris
11 Fullan, M and Rincon-Gallardo, S. (2016) Essential features of effective networks in educationJounral of Porfessional Capitla and Community. 1. (1) p.5-22
[12] Harris, A. and Jones, M. (2010) Professional Learning Communities and system improvement. Improving Schools 13 (2) p.172-181

discussed the importance of maintaining the creativity and professional autonomy that has characterised earlier SESP partnership working. The design and delivery of any support programme therefore needs to avoid the imposition of a 'narrow' or restrictive school improvement agenda.

4.4   There was considerable debate around the effect of the various contexts partnerships worked within on their capacity to engage in collaborative school improvement. The discussions underlined the need to provide adaptive models of how schools might collaborate locally that would allow school leaders to contextualise basic principles and general expectations into effective local practices and structures in their own partnerships.

4.5   School leaders expressed a clear set of needs in respect of developing their understanding of how collaborative school improvement works in practice, and how it could support the TPL strategy, in their schools and partnerships. These needs included how to: design collaborative school improvement initiatives; promote greater sharing and use of data and the existing knowledge base; and recruit and develop leaders of learning.

4.6   For many of the leaders intending to develop a more collaborative approach to school improvement the 'next step' was to engage more of their middle leaders in working with colleagues in other schools. Building leadership capacity at this level was seen as an essential element of a sustainable programme. The nature of current middle leadership development programmes was debated and raised questions as to whether there was currently sufficient capacity within the NI system to support middle leaders across the SESP to become more engaged.

4.7   The final area of discussion was the degree to which existing school improvement and accountability structures were supportive of school leaders within SESP working more collaboratively. The existing systems and structures were seen as being premised on a very different 'middle tier' than that which was emerging in the new Education Authority. The current approach to school improvement with its focus upon accountability and oversight was perceived as restrictive and unsupportive of risk taking and innovation. The school leaders argued that any support and development programme for SESP needed to draw in, and on, colleagues from the inspectorate and the Education Authority in order to achieve system wide change.

5. Recommendations

5.1 The development and support programme required by school leaders has to reflect both current realities and future aspirations concerning the SESP achieving its broader school improvement outcomes. The following set of recommendations is in two parts the first addresses the leadership development and professional learning required at different levels, the second suggests a new professional learning structure for SESP.

Developing distributed leadership of learning

I. The senior leadership of SESP partnerships should be provided with a bespoke leadership development programme that will support them in designing collaborative approaches to school improvement. The programme should provide differentiated support introducing senior leaders to different practice models, develop their understanding of effective collaborative professional learning, and how to build local capacity.

II. Middle leaders across partnerships need to be supported to develop as leaders of learning able to work across schools using a range of collaborative inquiry and joint practice development approaches. A practice based support programme utilizing a limited number of inquiry-based approaches focused on existing improvement agendas within partnerships would build capacity quickly across schools.

III. The development of teacher leadership is a priority but in the first instance should be based in teams/groups within schools, in order to increase participation and minimize costs, before expanding into cross-school working. Shared models of PLCs or SIGs, based upon common approaches to inquiry and practice development, would facilitate the transition from within school to cross school working. The design and implementation of these shared groups and practices would form part of the support programme for senior and middle leaders.

Creating a professional learning structure for SESP

IV. The main recommendation is to develop a new professional learning structure for SESP to support collaborative school improvement. The structure would be co-led by schools leaders who would form part of a 'Strategy Group' that would advise on the design of the structure and monitor and support its implementation. The involvement of schools leaders at this level would model the form of system leadership required within a SIS to the wider system.

V. The structure would consist of a core team who would work with a number of partnerships, selected on the basis of their existing capacity and the extent of their professional networks. The team would support these 'Hub' partnerships develop

programmes for senior leaders in their locality and design and deliver practice-based interventions with middle leaders.

VI. The time limited nature of the SESP and the need to build in sustainability over the short to medium term favours a 'depth to scope' approach to implementation. An approach based on developing the capacity of a limited number of Hubs who would then design more extensive programmes to meet the needs of local partnerships.

VII. In order to ensure that sufficient capacity is available at the point of implementation the core team would consist of school leaders and practitioners supported by external experts. Part-time secondments of school leaders and practitioners, with a background in collaborative school improvement and professional learning, to this core team should commence as soon as possible. The core team would work in partnership with SESP development officers in order to establish the Hub partnerships and evaluate their impact.

VIII. Reliance upon the core team to provide support and development would reduced over time as the capacity of the Hubs develops. The modeling of school-led and school-based professional learning by the higher capacity Hub partnerships would be important in establishing the wider moral responsibility of school leaders in system improvement.

IX. The support programmes once established within the Hubs, would need to provide opportunities for senior and middle leaders in other partnership and schools, as well as members of the EA and inspectorate, to collectively interrogate practical examples of school-led professional learning and improvement. The aim being to support the co-construction of new elements of collaborative working based upon effective models and the existing knowledge base. The design of this element of the programme should allow for leaders at all levels to engage in inquiry and joint practice development. Some of the examples used in the programme will undoubtedly be from Northern Ireland. For example, the Teaching and Learning Schools (NI) Programme, which derives from the OLEVI London Challenge Scheme[13]. There are also examples of pre-existing (informal) networks between schools in Limavady, Fermanagh, Ballycastle and Derry/Londonderry. There will be a need for leaders to engage with and learn from models from other systems.

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[13] The Teaching and Learning Schools (NI) Programme began in 2011/12 based on the idea that the development of pedagogic skills and classroom practice resided within schools rather than through external support agencies. The Programme is structured around six thematic areas covered in the training: starters; effective questioning; engagement; assessment for learning; differentiation; and, plenaries. The content of the sessions include: learning walks; facilitated discussions; online contributions; implementation in the classroom; micro-teaching; mentoring and coaching; and, quality assurance.