

A report on how a collaborative approach to leadership may help to develop an effective model of learning across a cluster of schools: considerations and implications for school leaders

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Aim and Focus of Inquiry

The aim of this inquiry is to look at how different elements of systems leadership can influence effective collaboration within and across schools in a cluster with the long- term focus of improving attainment outcomes for all.

The foci for this inquiry is three fold:

- To what extent are the key elements of systems leadership critical to developing effective collaborative learning models?
- Are system leaders clear on what effective collaborative learning is in order to support their schools and clusters?
- What are the next steps for schools and clusters to ensure that collaborative learning models have a sustained and positive impact?

The area of inquiry will extend beyond the time frame set for the SCEL Fellowship report which will effectively be a work-in-progress report as the inquiry itself is a three- year development in terms of the training of staff within the broader scope of improvement planning of individual schools and across the cluster.

Collaboration through a systems-leadership approach is something that I have been considering as part of the Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL) Fellowship programme. The practice of system leadership will provide a framework for discussion around what makes collaborative working successful.

Background to Inquiry

Effective collaboration as a method to improve attainment for all has gained a sharper focus with the recent publication of the consultation for the Education (Scotland) Bill (2017) with its targeted approach regarding the importance of collaboration between schools. The Scottish Government (SG) (2017a: 23) clearly states that:

The Collaboratives will bring a collective focus to driving continuous and systematic improvement, particularly in relation to closing the attainment gap. They will demonstrate, strengthen and support collaborative working, innovation and the sharing of best practice between schools and across our education system.

As legislation will guide and underpin the roles that different organisations will take it is worth noting that at no point does the consultative document attempt to define what collaboration may look like in terms of successful practice. Increasing autonomy for schools within the 2017 Education (Scotland) Bill Consultation strengthens the argument for educational establishments to look at what exactly is effective collaboration, how it impacts on pupil attainment and how a systems-leadership approach to this critical part of Scottish education can be best developed and utilised. It is essential that reflection on the meaning of collaboration does not narrow nor broaden to such an extent that it becomes either constricted or ineffective in its use. Friend and Cook (1992: 7) broadly defined teacher collaboration as “a style of direct interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaging in shared decision making as they work towards a common goal.” Hargreaves (2003) notes that collaborative efforts can become a distraction if the collaborators are not focused on student learning and achievement. Further to this research by Vescio, et al. (2008) and Wimberley (2012) shows that successful collaboration is grounded in a well- constructed on-going agenda that maintains a clear and persistent focus on data about student learning.

Sharratt and Planche (2016: 4) define collaboration as “co-laboring to become responsible and accountable for our own work while supporting the work of other collaborators.”

They also state,

True collaboration involves a sense of parity and reciprocity as we set clear goals, develop trust, and foster strong relationships, which drive and sustain our learning as a collective. (Sharratt and Planche, 2016: 4)

For the purpose of the research effective collaboration will be where:

- Clear goals are set
- The development of positive working relationships is key to success and
- Pupil learning remains the key focus.

Practice within the cluster to develop trust and build positive working relationships has developed and over the next three years we have agreed a commitment to support teachers’ professional learning based around the programme of ‘Visible Learning’ (VL) (Hattie, 2012). This is being funded through the use of the Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) to reflect the key drivers of the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) (Education Scotland (ES), 2017) and National Improvement Framework (NIF) (SG, 2017b). The 2018 Improvement plan for the NIF makes clear reference to the importance of “greater professional development and collaboration” (SG, 2017b: 5) as a common theme through all regional improvement collaborative plans. Hattie (2009) puts forward the very simple concept that what teachers do matters; therefore if teachers represent the greatest source of variance within our system in terms of the levels of attainment our young people achieve then this becomes a key area of systems-wide leadership focus. From a collaborative point of view within a cluster of schools the intention is to ensure equity in the educational experience of children and young people by ensuring consistency in teacher performance.

Literature Review

The OECD’s (2015) report on improving schools in Scotland makes a very clear statement around collaborative learning which allows us to consider how a systems leadership approach can impact positively. They stated that:

There needs to be clarity about the kinds of collaboration that work best to bring about the innovations and improvements to enhance student learning, and to create coherent and cohesive cultures of system-wide collaboration.....it is to argue for greater consistency in collaborative professionalism and of moving towards the higher quality collaborative practices that have the most positive effects on student learning. (OECD, 2015: 17)

When talking about a systems leadership approach the background to this current thinking and the transitional period from instructional to distributed leadership is important. Southworth (2005) discusses what is seen as being critical in terms of a learning-centred leadership approach. The recognition that a school requires leaders at all levels is one that continues into a systems leadership approach but most importantly, at the time, Southworth asked the question that if leadership required greater distribution what was it that we wanted to distribute about leadership? This is pertinent with the current thought being that if we require greater and more effective collaboration what is it we want to change? In the intervening years this focus on learning-centred leadership has metamorphosed and grown so that a systems

approach in a school takes into account the different levels that an individual has to operate at in order to be seen as a systems leader. Dimmock (2016) is very clear that in order for a Head Teacher to be viewed as a systems leader that they must operate and contribute to the success of schools beyond their own. Put into the context of this study it is the expectations of head teachers to collaborate for the good of their cluster of schools as opposed to just their own that will enable them to be viewed as system leaders.

It is also essential to look at what the factors are that will enable schools to move from being places where collaboration remains purely a paper exercise to actually being something that is purposefully practised thereby enabling teachers to experience real life collaborations on a regular basis. Sharratt and Planche (2016: xxv) say that:

Teachers who are able to collaborate effectively with peers are more likely to see the value in partnering with students, parents and the broader community.

What this highlights is the importance of relationships in effective collaboration. In their book on Teacher Agency, Priestley et al. (2015) use a case study of two schools in similar settings but for whom a different approach to collaboration resulted in different outcomes. The “more effective” of the two schools was viewed to have a culture of innovation and risk taking that was encouraged amongst all staff whilst being supported through sharing. The research showed that “it is in the social structures of the school that we found more substantive differences” (Priestley et al., 2015: 100). What this relates to and is discussed by Dimmock (2016: 66) when looking at systems leadership is that where the orientation of relationships within or beyond a school are predominantly lateral, as opposed to vertical, this can facilitate a collaborative culture which is more sustainable due to the relationships that are allowed to develop and sustain effective practice. In her paper on Creating a Collaborative Learning Culture, Stafford (2017) stresses the importance of individuals taking responsibility for their own learning whilst respecting the input of others. The need for system leaders to recognise this and create environments where collaboration can progress effectively is crucial.

Putting this into the context of the collaboration that the cluster of schools is involved in Hattie (2012) talks about the importance of the attributes that makes schools successful. He calls these the “[i]ntel inside” and focuses on those that clearly have a visible impact on pupil learning, hence the use of the phrase by Hattie of “know thy impact”. It will be a core part of this inquiry going forwards for the system leaders involved not only to identify those attributes for their school individually but for the cluster overall to attain its goal of a positive impact on pupil achievement.

The challenge that exists going forwards for any organisation involved in collaborative practices is how it is sustained to ensure continuing positive impacts. Some would argue that the time has come whereby it is no longer practical to not consider working collaboratively and the Education (Scotland Bill) (2017) certainly promotes this further. However, the collaborative nature of this sharing and exchange of knowledge must have purpose in mind if it is to be effective. In their recent publication, Collaborative Professionalism, Hargreaves and O’Connor (2017) talk about a transition from professional collaboration to collaborative professionalism. They state:

Collaborative professionalism is about how teachers.....transform teaching and learning together to work with all students.....It is organized in an evidence-informed, but not data-driven, way.....and continuous collaborative inquiry. The joint work.....is embedded in the culture and life of the school, where educators actively care for and have solidarity with each other as fellow-professionals. (Hargreaves and O’Connor, 2017: 1)

The article recognises that whilst schools have moved into a culture where collaboration is becoming the norm what has often transpired is the wrong types of collaboration. If the next big shift is to be towards collaborative professionalism it is not just a case of enhanced collaboration but this should relate to professionalism in terms of the use of data to inform good judgements, candid and respectful professional dialogue alongside a collective responsibility for each other's results.

Research Inquiry: Methodology and Data Collection

The focus of this inquiry involves working with school leaders to gain a greater understanding of collaborative practices currently and how they can develop effective positive change in these practices through the VL programme over the next three years. The goal is to achieve a consistent approach to the language of learning across the cluster to enable all young people to achieve what they are capable of. The inquiry involves 12 schools – one secondary, ten primaries and one special school, representing over 2,500 pupils in total and staff of 220.

The cluster has been working on the project since November 2017. As the project is in its first year data collection has focused on:

- The school capability assessments (Appendix One) completed as part of the initial engagement between individual schools and the VL consultant in late October and early November 2017.
- The evaluation (Appendix Two) completed at the end of the leadership training sessions that have taken place in November and December 2017 to enable school leaders to support and challenge their schools and cluster colleagues in their engagement with the programme.
- Individual leadership questionnaires (Appendix Three) and interviews (Appendix Four) with Head Teachers in the cluster.

The aim of this inquiry is to utilise the data in line with the three key questions posed in the introduction.

Findings and Impact of Work

The school capability assessments (Appendix One) took place prior to the programme starting with input from an external consultant. Focused on the four key areas of the VL programme – The Visible Learner, Know thy Impact, Inspired and passionate teachers, Effective feedback – it evaluates where schools are currently in their practice. Whilst variations across the cluster are expected analysis also shows schools identifying the same areas for development. These include:

- Appropriate and consistent use of language that supports pupils' progress and understanding of their learning.
- Use of feedback by and through teachers that allows learners to take ownership and direction of their learning.
- Peer and self-assessment, the impact of this on pupils' learning and the capacity of pupils to be "assessment ready"

At this initial stage of the programme the impact of this baseline assessment was evident in the discussions and focus at the first leadership training day where, collectively, school leaders identified the need for a common and consistent language of learning to support pupils in their attainment. Evidence to support this came through not only in the evaluations from the day (Appendix Two), with 50% of the cohort identifying the importance of the concept of what a visible learner is and/or a visible learning school, but in addition all respondents from the leadership questionnaires (Appendix Three) stated that a shared language of learning was a priority for them in their school. What this translated into when asked about what the key priority for the cluster to achieve was:

- A culture of trust with open and honest dialogue across schools to identify key strengths within schools and sharing of best practice across the cluster.
- Developing learners that are confident in articulating and / or demonstrating their learning and progress.
- Developing a shared understanding of what progress looks like and how to use data to inform practice to maximise the impact of interventions where “gaps” exist.
- A continuity and consistency of experience for the learner across their education.

This exemplifies that the cluster is in the process of setting out clear goals for the project, essential for effective collaboration.

In looking at the elements of system leadership which will affect a model of VL the results from the leadership questionnaire (Appendix Three) were thought provoking. Leaders were asked to identify how they viewed the situation currently as well as their preferred future through the VL programme. With respect to the current situation (Figure One, page 10) it shows what needs to be addressed if the cluster is going to collaborate effectively going forwards, namely:

- The need to enhance the relevant competencies in our leaders.
- The need to further develop a culture of trust between schools.
- The sharing of resource to effect consistency of practice.

It is important to recognise that in being honest the school leaders are, in fact, taking some of those first steps as system leaders in relation to the skill-set described by Dimmock (2016). School leaders review how they want this to be once the VL programme is embedded across the cluster (Figure Two, page 11). All statements are crucial but those deemed to be most important – cluster wide engagement of leaders at all levels, school leaders working in partnership, sharing of resource and working on improving learning across all schools – are a necessity for effective collaboration. In individual interviews with Head teachers (see Appendix Four) about Dimmock’s (2016) skill-set for systems leaders all could identify how different skills could be identified within their schools, and in some cases across the cluster. Head Teacher One stated,

I am drawn towards the leadership for T&L and leadership for equity and social justice given the focus on this through current government initiatives. However, both are linked to the qualities, dispositions and attributes of high performing leaders.” (HT1, 2018: lines 6-9).

FIGURE ONE: SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP AND VISIBILITY OF THE CURRENT SITUATION

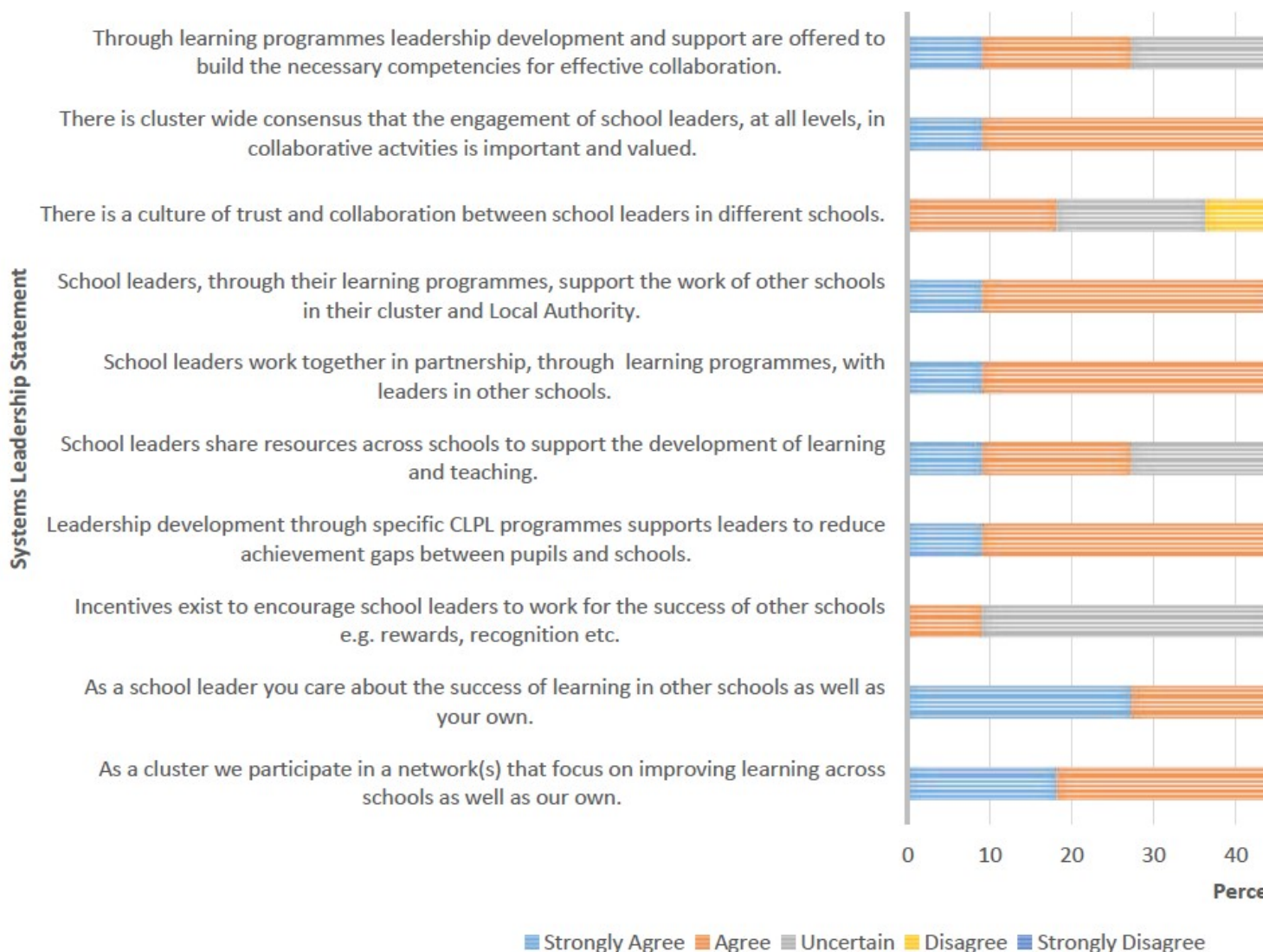
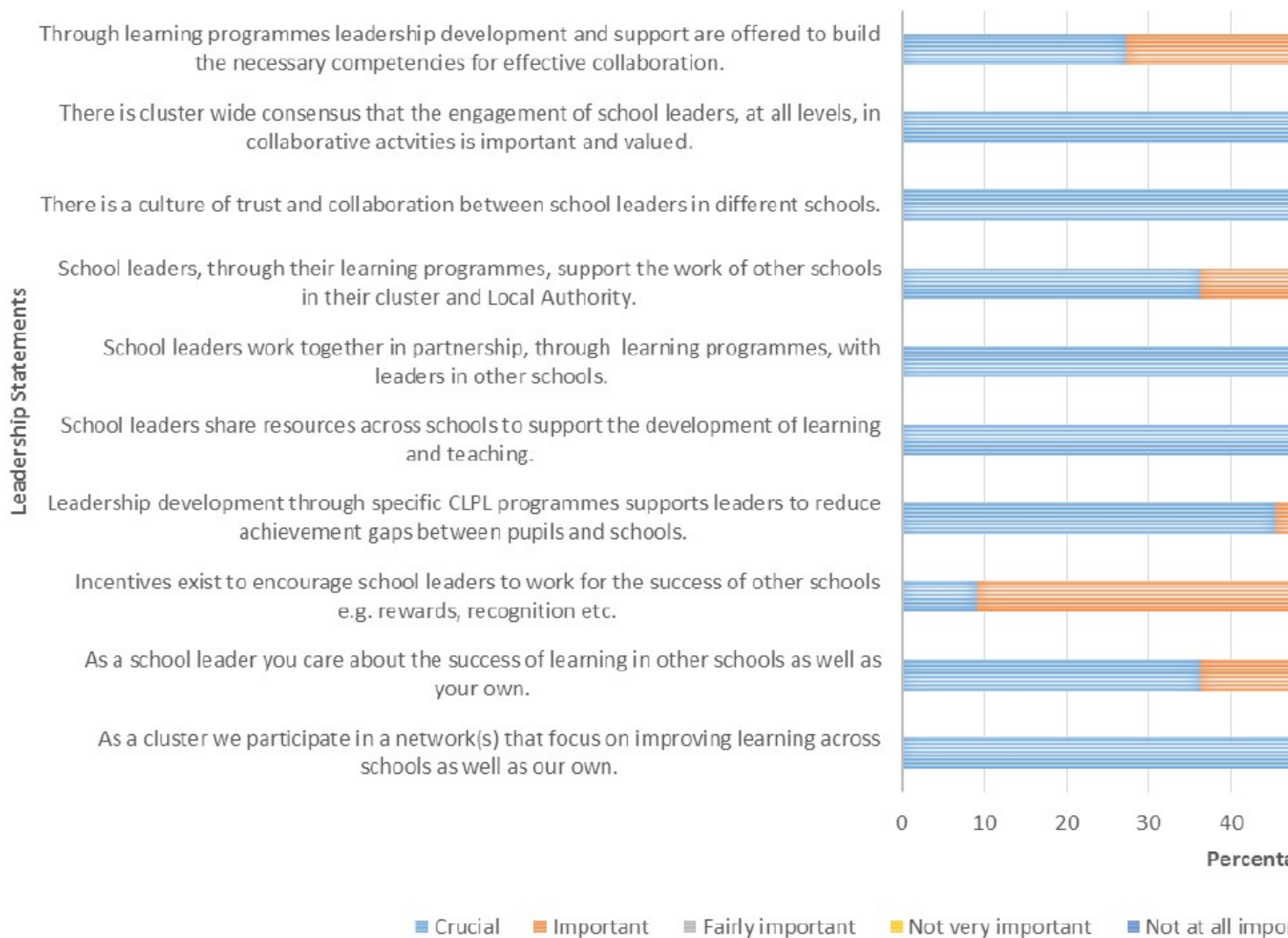


FIGURE TWO: SYSTEMS LEADERSHIP AND VISIBLE PREFERRED FUTURE



Another Head Teacher stated that, “the teams within schools needs to be translated into teams across the cluster; the potential is there but development is required.” (HT2, 2018; lines 12-14). These statements are really good examples of individuals looking at the perspective of cluster working from a systems leadership viewpoint. All interview participants (HT1, HT2 and HT3) were able to give further detail to the framework of responses received from the leadership participants with one participant saying, “every time discussions, planning and actions take place we must be thinking about the impact on learners and levels of achievement going forward” (HT3, 2018: lines 253 – 255). This shows a clear understanding around the purpose of collaboration to enable equity of provision across the cluster. What the findings of this initial stage of the project shows is that there is clarity amongst the senior leaders of the schools involved regarding what the goals of the project should be, the need for collaboration to be an integral part of the project as well as the desire to create an effective model of learning.

Considerations and implications for school leaders

Critical to the future of the project is that the identified elements for success actually allow the goals of the project to be achieved within the timescales set and for the impact of the project to be sustained for all learners. Head Teacher Two (Appendix Four) identifies the need to get staff to engage with the VL programme as an important first step and this reflects back to the concept of collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves and O’Connor, 2017) that requires candid and respectful professional dialogue to enable individuals, schools and the cluster to see their collective responsibility.

Initial feedback suggests that the basis is there within the cluster for effective collaboration to support the impact that the VL model can have on the progress and attainment of pupils across the cluster. A recommendation for school leaders is that they must engage in prioritisation of the strategy within school improvement plans where key foci are shared and developed in all schools with milestones to enable effective sharing of data to inform further judgements.

In developing this approach there will be the need for school leaders to support the professional learning of staff beyond the core days of the programme so that collaboration does become embedded as an effective learning tool. Whilst there is no one solution or magic wand to effect collaboration in a way that will ensure impact for all learners’ progress and attainment it is perhaps pertinent to reflect on the work of Hattie (2012) and Dimmock (2000) who both recognise the medium- to long-term work that is required around transformation within schools. In light of this it is a recommendation that school leaders need to have a methodology that is consistently implemented across the cluster to support those areas identified as priorities to achieve the goals set.

Reflections and Learning as part of the SCEL Fellowship Programme

Participation in the SCEL Fellowship programme has enabled me to explore the concept of system leadership in depth and apply it to a broad range of educational settings which has built and influenced my understanding and practice. It has also provided me with a framework for my area of inquiry, allowing me to engage the theory within a piece of action research. Research has shown that the need for collaboration to be effective in education has perhaps never been more important. The inquiry has allowed me to challenge the vagaries that have existed around the term “collaboration” showing that there is an implication for school leaders to focus on their collective actions to enable the collaboration, large or small, to have a positive and sustained impact on learners.

Whilst the success of the project overall cannot be commented on at this time the initial stages shows a cluster of school leaders who are working for the greater good of the cluster. On a personal level, the capacity to combine the development of the VL project with my professional learning around system leadership and collaboration and think more deeply about the impact that I can have as a school leader has been invigorating. As Dimmock (2016; page 79) states, “the concept of system leadership *per se* remains under-developed” and I look forward to being part of a system that moves this forwards.

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