

SCEL Fellowship Programme
Area of Enquiry

Developing the Capacity for Improvement in Small Rural Schools through creating a Small Schools' Network

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Introduction

The purpose of this account is to explore how we can build capacity for improvement in small rural schools through the development of a small schools' network. The main focus of the network is through joint school improvement planning the setting up of a professional learning community (PLC) to enable teacher professional research and development with the ultimate aim of positively impacting on the learning experience of all the children in the schools involved. The first section explains the original rationale for my area of enquiry followed by a description of the key concepts that are central to my account. I then give a summary of progress and impact with planned future action. The final section describes the model we have developed which can be replicated across the local authority and in other areas and my key findings at a system leadership level.

Background and Context

As the headteacher of two small rural schools I have become increasingly aware of the need to develop capacity for school improvement in small schools. This was the challenge I brought with me to my Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL) Fellowship interview in January 2015. From my own experience and through talking to colleague headteachers I had found that teachers in small rural schools often feel quite isolated compared to their counterparts in larger schools due to fewer opportunities to work collegiately. Their rural location can also mean that professional learning opportunities are inaccessible due to distance and time constraints. Michael Fullan talks about building professional capital through collaboration (Fullan, 2012) and I realised that I needed to lead my staff along this route if my schools were to improve at the rate needed to meet the demands of Curriculum for Excellence, the Scottish government's long term commitment to reform the curriculum.

Being responsible for two schools I am already in the fortunate position of being able to bring both schools together to build capacity for improvement. We have a joint school improvement plan (SIP) and joint teacher collegiate working wherever possible. This joint working arrangement was praised in our latest HMIE inspection (Education Scotland, 2014). However they did point out that this collegiate way of working needed to be extended further to include other schools if we were to move from a rating of 'good' to 'very good' or 'excellent'.

The invitation to my SCEL Fellowship interview galvanised me into action. Exploring the current literature I identified a common theme. Mel Ainscow writes extensively how school to school partnerships are a powerful way of fostering improvements (Ainscow, 2015) and I began to explore how I could build on this with my own schools. I needed to think about a more sustainable model for my schools and one that could be replicated across the local authority and further.

Consequently, I approached a colleague headteacher of two schools of similar size to mine to explore the opportunity of setting up a network. Facing similar challenges in terms of limited capacity for improvement she was keen to explore a way forward and it was this area of enquiry, developing a four schools network that became the focus for my work for the SCEL Fellowship programme. We decided to develop a four schools' SIP with a PLC where our teachers could carry out research and develop their classroom practice collaboratively.

Key Concepts

The key concepts are 'school improvement plan', 'professional learning community' and 'school network'.

Huber and Conway describe a high-quality SIP as one that clearly articulates a school's ability to plan, implement, and monitor their path to improved student achievement for all learners (Huber & Conway, 2015). Our joint SIP certainly tries to do this and by working as four schools on the plan we have had increased capacity to distribute tasks, continuously evaluate progress and plan future actions.

In their study of Singapore schools Hairon and Dimmock define a PLC as a group of people who share and critically interrogate their practice in 'an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way in order to promote student learning' (Hairon & Dimmock, 2012, p.412.). This way of working is so beneficial that the aim is for all schools in Singapore to be PLCs. In the literature PLCs and school networks are closely linked. Schiff et al (2015) describe the importance of school networks arguing that 'the most effective teachers do not work in isolation. Instead, they foster collaboration and teamwork in order to continually improve their craft and deliver their expertise to ultimately impact the students they teach. Individual teachers working by themselves can result in a flattening of professional growth'.

Developing our Four Schools Network

My headteacher colleague and I began by evaluating the areas for improvement with stakeholders in our own schools as a starting point last January using pupil assessment data and data from the local authority. We then met together with our management teams over the course of the summer term to develop a SIP for our four schools for the session 2015-2016. Our first management meetings were far more productive than I could ever have hoped for. I was experiencing the 'leadership gestalt' that Jay Helpert writes about in his fellowship submission (Helpert, 2015, p.4). I could see immediately how we were more productive working together as one larger management team than we ever were as two small teams in our own schools. I have learned that school improvement is undoubtedly a social process (Ainscow, 2015) and through working with two other schools we were extending that social process beyond our school walls.

We realised immediately however, that although this was a definite improvement to our way of working that it wasn't sufficient just to have the management teams working collaboratively. We needed our teachers to work together as a PLC to really impact on the children. So we drew up a calendar of collegiate sessions, one per month to fit in with our working-time agreements. As part of their career long professional learning we were expecting our teachers to take on areas of enquiry (GTCS, 2012, p.8.) and planned for our collegiate sessions to be a 'platform for professional collaboration' where teachers could share their learning 'across the organisational and geographical boundaries of school sites' (Bentley & Cazaly 2015p.8.). We also wanted to use the time together to expose the teachers to research and reading they may not have encountered otherwise.

Our first session was in August 2015, the first week of term. The venue was the local high school as we wanted the travelling distance to be as equitable as possible. The launch event was very well-received. George Gilchrist, a SCEL Fellow from the previous year spoke about how his teachers' practitioner enquiries had impacted on the children in his schools and Jacqueline Morley and Charlaine Simpson from the General Teaching Council Scotland (GTCS) gave a presentation about how the teachers' collaborative work could lead to professional recognition and how they could access research on the GTCS's website. Speaking to the teachers after this first session I was delighted to witness their enthusiasm and eagerness to work with others.

Throughout the Standard for Career-Long Professional Learning document, there are numerous references to collegiate, collaborative working practices to develop teacher knowledge, understanding and skills to engage in practitioner enquiry to inform pedagogy, learning and subject knowledge (GTCS, 2012) and the Donaldson Report also recommends

new and strengthened models of partnership based on jointly agreed principles and involving shared responsibility for key areas of teacher education (Donaldson, 2010). We have kept this National agenda in mind with all our collaborative work and were delighted when the recent publication of How Good is Our School 4 explicitly refers to the strength of working in this way (HGIOS 4, p. 44.).

Impact

At the time of writing we are nearly nine months into our four schools network. My management team has increased from two people (me and my principal teacher) to five (me, my colleague headteacher, my principal teacher and her two principal teachers). I benefit from regular contact with my colleague headteacher for mutual support and guidance and the principal teachers all report that they prefer working together on tasks rather than alone as they had worked previously. We have monthly meetings for our teachers to network and collaborate, to share progress with their practitioner enquiries and discuss their professional reading.

It is still too early to measure the impact on our children but the qualitative evidence from the teachers across the four schools is that the PLC is certainly impacting on the teachers' learning. Having recently questioned them I have been delighted with comments like:

'There are more colleagues to share and bounce ideas off. Good to collaborate and share practice with a larger team',

'More confidence in meeting new colleagues and less shy about not knowing some things- encouraging me to ask and find out',

'Learning from others, professional dialogue, collaboration, widening the pool of ideas, reflecting on practice with others, being able to mentor and coach others'.

Feedback like this is evidence that the teachers are really benefitting from the PLC. If, as Dylan William writes, the most important influence on our children's learning is the quality of the teacher (William, 2007/8) then the learning facilitated by our network is certainly moving us in the right direction.

As a result of the PLC the teachers have already made changes to their classroom practice. One example of this is the early level teachers who have been researching learning environments and developing their own classrooms to enable their children to have more control over their learning. In all four schools my headteacher colleague and I have observed this improvement in practice. Through the PLC the teachers are continuously evaluating and

working collaboratively to plan their next steps, essential to ensure that improvements to teaching and learning are made.

The teachers reported that the main barrier to this way of working has been lack of time so next session we will need to ensure that more time is built in for collaborative work outside the planned PLC meetings so they can form small research groups and spend more time in each other's schools. The teachers haven't reported any other barriers so far.

At the start of this work we asked all the teachers to agree a set of principles or tenets to guide their work and they have reported that these have helped to guide their work together with comments like:

'I think it was good to highlight these so that we had a collaborative outcome rather than everyone working to principles they individually thought were important'.

'People are certainly able to honestly share without prejudgement which is really important'.

It will be important to revisit these principles at regular intervals, especially if we are joined by new colleagues to ensure the teachers have ownership of them and an agreed understanding of an effective way of working.

Next Steps

We have certainly got off to a good start. The teachers are all responding positively to this new way of working and we are beginning to see improvements in classroom practice. We need to constantly evaluate these improvements and their impact on teaching and learning and continue to support the teachers in their research and development.

The next steps for our four schools' network is to include two other small schools in our locality that are also experiencing the same challenges of limited capacity for improvement that we did before forming our network. My headteacher colleague and I plan to meet with this headteacher, using our timeline to identify common areas for improvement and plan how we can bring the six schools together next session. Moving from a network of four schools to six will be interesting and I am aware that the dynamics of how we work together at headteacher, senior management team and teacher level will change. It will be important to agree new tenets or principles for bringing the two new schools into our network from the outset and to ensure that the new teachers feel equally valued and included.

The next step for me as a member of the local authority Professional Learning Operational Group is to work with other partner school headteachers in helping them to set up their own school networks beginning with a presentation at the headteacher meeting in January 2016. I am also meeting with headteachers in Stirling who are interested in developing their own schools' networks.

The next steps for me as a system leader and a SCEL Fellowship Participant are to continue to improve my own schools and how we work as a network ensuring the impact on teaching and learning and the sustainability of the model. I will support other schools in the local authority that are ready to form their own networks and as a part of SCEL I will continue to engage at a national level and contribute to improving Scottish Education wherever possible.

Key Findings

My key findings are that at system level, where schools work together in collaboration there is the greatest impact on school improvement. School based capacity building and professional learning (Glaze, 2013) and system leadership 'where successful headteachers' are 'motivated by the idea of taking on improvement roles in other schools' (Ainscow, 2015) are the most powerful ways of really making a difference to the young people in our schools. This is the self-improving system Ainscow talks about where headteachers identify the areas for improvement and the systems to bring about those improvements (Ainscow, 2015).

It is with this in mind that I have developed a timeline to share with colleague headteachers across the local authority in a headteacher engagement meeting in January 2016 so they can begin to think about setting up their own collaborative networks using and adapting our model to suit their context.

Timeline for setting up a School Collaborative Network

Month	Action
January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify Headteacher/s to work with. (Consider similar sized schools, location)
February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involve all stakeholders in own school self-evaluation and identify areas for school improvement and clear goals and outcomes for collaborative network.
March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Joint Senior Management Team (SMT) meetings between the schools to discuss self-evaluation and identify common areas for improvement.
May/June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop joint School Improvement Plan (SIP) based on self-evaluation. Carry out teachers' Professional Review and Development (PRD) considering opportunities for collaborative work. Agree and write up Working Time Agreement (WTA) to include collaborative work. Plan Collegiate Activity Time (CAT), joint in-service, joint management meetings and other joint work for following session. Survey teachers about expectations around joint working.
August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agree principles for joint working with staff using information from initial teacher surveys. Begin joint working (monthly CAT sessions and monthly SMT meetings are ideal).
November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interim evaluation.
January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluation of impact, adaptation where necessary and begin to include other schools where appropriate. (Ongoing clear goal and outcome setting needs to be integral to the whole process).

The Fellowship programme has taught me that our small schools' network is part of a real sea change in education across the world from the school federations of the London Challenge in England (Chapman, & Muijs, 2013) to the development of school networks in Australia (Bentley & Cazaly, 2015) and PLCs in Singapore (Hairon & Dimmock, 2012). As a profession we can no longer work in silos. If we are to give our children the best possible education we need to remember that:

'Children are the priority

Change is the reality

Collaboration is the strategy' (Anon)

Since embarking on the SCEL Fellowship programme I have also learned a lot about what Julia Middleton calls 'leading beyond authority' (Middleton, 2007). I understand that the value of networks extends beyond my own schools, local authority and even country; it is my responsibility as a leader to see the wider context and my role in it. As Middleton argues, we need to move into new and unfamiliar territory. This is an integral part to leading beyond authority and it takes courage. I have had to work well-beyond my 'comfort-zone' but now recognise that it is my responsibility as a system leader to work in this way and as with anything worthwhile, the more effort we put in the greater the reward.

Clive Dimmock spoke to the Fellowship participants in May 2015 about our role as system leaders and about the need for system level leadership to raise the performance of schools country-wide. Through my tacit learning from the development of our own small schools network and my reading and research I have learned that it is a complicated and challenging process but one that all our leaders should be considering. It is our moral responsibility to work with others, to share and collaborate if we are to raise the performance of schools and the outcomes for our children at a system-wide level.

I have certainly grown as a leader through the SCEL Fellowship programme. I am far closer to becoming the sort of 'high performing leader' Clive Dimmock spoke to the Fellowship Participants in September about than I was at my SCEL Fellowship interview back in January 2015. If high performance leadership is a process that 'builds capacity by optimising human and other resources' in achieving shared goals (Dimmock, 2012) I feel that the work I have been doing on developing the four schools network is certainly contributing to this.

Conclusion

Since starting the SCEL Fellowship programme my professional learning has been hugely challenged and extended. The regular sessions with my coach have been invaluable in helping me to clarify key issues and identify next steps. The support from my academic advisor has directed my research and helped me to reach a far clearer understanding about the importance of networks; systems level leadership and identify my role as a systems level leader. I have felt privileged to hear first-hand from world-class educationalists about current educational issues and have also valued the support and friendship from fellow participants and SCEL staff.

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