PART III

Chapter 10

Understanding Networks for Innovation in Policy and Practice

by
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Abstract. *Hopkins' conclusions as rapporteur of the 2000 international Portugal seminar on networking were based especially on the experience of five major networks – the Portuguese Good Hope Programme; the Durham District School Board and The Learning Consortium, Ontario, Canada; the German Network of Innovative Schools established by the Bertelsmann Foundation; Improving the Quality of Education for All (IQEA), England and beyond; and the European Observatory on School Innovation, co-ordinated from France with 13 participating countries. He identifies key conditions for effective education networking: consistency of values and focus, clarity of structure; knowledge creation, utilisation and transfer; rewards related to learning; dispersed leadership and empowerment; and adequate resources. He also identifies and discusses the role of key stakeholders – innovative teachers, principals and schools; network initiators; network managers; consultants/trainers; evaluators and researchers; and policy-makers. The chapter includes a discussion of the role of governments and policy.*

1. Networks and the Lisbon Seminar

The Portuguese seminar made an important contribution to the work on the OECD "Schooling for Tomorrow" programme through its focus on networks and innovation. The seminar aims were: *a)* to understand the nature, conditions, and potential of particular networks and initiatives, with different structural features and from different educational traditions; and, *b)* to discuss the role of policy to support such networks/initiatives and identify relevant policy guidelines. The five contrasting network cases (see Box 10.1)[2] made no pretence to be comprehensive and represent all types of networks but were chosen to illustrate a range of networking practices. They are sufficiently different as to provide the basis for identifying an emerging typology of networks, and sufficiently similar to suggest common characteristics.

Various interpretations of the network concept notwithstanding, seminar participants were adamant that they are not simply "clubs". Although networks bring together those with like-minded interests, they are more than just opportunities to share good practice. The following definition of networks emerged from the discussions during the seminar:

Networks are purposeful social entities characterised by a commitment to quality, rigour, and a focus on outcomes. They are also an effective means of supporting innovation in times of change. In education, networks promote the dissemination of good practice, enhance the professional development of teachers, support capacity building in schools, mediate between centralised and decentralised structures, and assist in the process of re-structuring and re-culturing educational organisations and systems.

Although not all of the cases share all of these characteristics, in general they have resulted in the following advantages from collaborative working:

- the reduction of isolation;
- collaborative professional development;
- joint solutions to shared problems;
- the exchange of practice and expertise;
- the facilitation of knowledge sharing and school improvement;
- opportunities to incorporate external facilitation.

Box 10.1 **An overview of the five study networks**

Good Hope Programme, Portugal: The Good Hope Programme was established by the Ministry of Education in Portugal in March 1998. Originally designed for 3 years, it began operating in January 1999. This nation-wide programme is innovative in the Portuguese context. It contrasts with the traditional pattern of centralisation by encouraging autonomy and experimentation through a process of producing research on emerging good practices, analysing and disseminating them, and supporting the work of teachers and schools. There are four strands to the Good Hope Programme: *i)* the improvement of learning for all; *ii)* developing the school as an educational institution; *iii)* ensuring school/community interaction; and *iv)* the educational uses of ICT.

Durham District School Board and The Learning Consortium, Ontario, Canada: The Learning Consortium was established in 1988 as a school/university partnership between four school districts. The purpose of the consortium is to improve the quality of education for students in schools and universities by focusing on teacher development, school improvement and the restructuring of local school districts. The Faculty of Education at the University of Toronto provides support to the Consortium on a regular basis. Teacher training is at the core of the improvement work. In-service workshops, institutes and conferences are tailored to meet the demands from teachers to upgrade their skills in instruction and assessment.

German Network of Innovative Schools (NIS): The German Network of Innovative Schools was established in 1998 at the Munster Conference by the Bertelsmann Foundation as a follow-up to the Carls Bertelsmann Prize "96" Project. The Network is designed to facilitate knowledge transfer between schools for the purpose of school improvement and reform. It is an open network of 460 schools, with 13 Learning Networks that are funded for 3 years (1998-2001). The network provides the means not only for exchanging information between innovative schools, but also acts as a new form of professional development for teachers who have traditionally been isolated.

Improving the Quality of Education for All (IQEA), England and beyond: The IQEA network was originally developed in 1990 at the University of Cambridge, and is now based at the University of Nottingham. Some 200 schools have been involved in the programme, mainly in England but also internationally. The IQEA programme aims to improve schools' capacity to manage external change for the purpose of continuous improvement, as well as creating the conditions for more effective teaching and learning. Although the IQEA approach to school improvement works with individual schools, it is most effective when schools come together in networks to share their own good practice and learn from each other.

Box 10.1 **An overview of the five study networks** (cont.)

European Observatory on School Innovation – The European Observatory was established in 1994-95 following the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty to facilitate the creation of information networks to help resolve educational issues relating to national policies and priorities set by the EU. The Network involves participants from 13 European countries and is supported by the Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique (INRP), in Paris. The aims of the Observatory are to: *i)* gather and analyse information on innovation; *ii)* identify signs of change and "hot spots"; *iii)* allow innovators to network and raise theoretical issues; *iv)* foster Europe-wide innovation; *v)* describe and compare national and regional policies; and *vi)* pool and compare knowledge on innovation.

Networks have more potential than perhaps has previously been realised to support and enhance educational processes and outcomes.

The following quotations from the seminar provide a flavour of the enthusiasm for that potential.

- Good networks are horizontal partnerships that value professional expertise and mutual learning. In so doing, they overcome hierarchy and create connections between different levels of the system. They are support structures for teacher and school development.
- Good networks are in the knowledge-creating and teacher learning business. They are motivated and bound together by the desire to improve our schools and the lives of the young people who travel through them.
- We want to develop young people who are participating members of society. We must model that by being collaborating members of the educational community.
- Co-operative learning is not an educational philosophy – it is a way of life.
- It is always a pleasure when people of good will work together.

2. The Conditions for Effective Networks

The qualities of networks to meet their potential for innovation and change are not, however, easily acquired. A number of key conditions need to be in place, as identified at the seminar:

Consistency of values and focus – it is important that networks have a common aim and purpose, and that the values underpinning the network are well articulated and "owned" by those involved. This

consistency of values and purpose also relates to the need for the focus of the network to be consistent with the overarching policy framework.

Clarity of structure – effective networks are well organised with clear operating procedures and mechanisms for ensuring that maximum participation is achieved within and between schools. These structures promote involvement that is broad based, preferably with a whole organisation or systemic focus, rather than being narrow, limiting or particular.

Knowledge creation, utilisation and transfer – the key purpose of networks is to create and disseminate knowledge to support educational improvement and innovation. Such knowledge and practice needs to be based on evidence, focus on the core features of schooling, and be subject to robust quality assurance procedures.

Rewards related to learning – those who belong to networks need to feel that their involvement is worthwhile. Rewards for networking are best related to supporting professional development and the encouraging of learning. Effective networks invest in people.

Dispersed leadership and empowerment – highly effective networks contain skilful people who collaborate and work well together. The skills required by network members are similar to the skill sets associated with effective teams and include a focus on dispersed leadership and empowerment.

Adequate resources – networks need to be adequately resourced particularly in terms of time, finance and human capital. It is not necessarily the quantum of resource that is important, more crucially there needs to be flexibility in the way in which it is deployed.

3. Key Stakeholders in Networks[3]

To identify and support exemplary educational practice, most networks aspire to function as horizontal partnerships valuing co-operation and a mutual exchange. Many different groups and individuals are involved in facilitating and maintaining networks, and learning takes place among the respective stakeholders who take each other seriously as professional partners. The co-operation among the different stakeholders is of an ongoing nature and ideally leads to a more systemic understanding of innovation and change among all the partners. Although different networks will have a different configuration of stakeholders, it is important to identify these groups and the contributions that people within them can make. This highlights a key feature of networks in that they reflect a way of working based on an investment in people and relationships, rather than structures and hierarchies.

The most important group of stakeholders is the *innovative teachers/ principals and their schools*. Although they provide the focus for networking activity, they do not always initiate it.

The second group of stakeholders, sometimes overlapping with the first, is thus the *initiators*. These can be innovative teachers or principals, but are often universities or research institutes, government agencies or charitable foundations.

A third stakeholder group are those who *manage* a network – its steering group. The steering group can be the initiators, it can be made up of representatives of the schools as main stakeholders, or it can consist of some other form of management put in place by the networking initiators.

Many networks involve *consultants or trainers* as a fourth group of stakeholders. Their role is to support the development work of the network. Sometimes consultants are brought in from outside agencies to provide professional training, but often teachers from innovative schools within the network act as trainers for other network participants.

When a basic level of development has been achieved, many networks start to evaluate their progress and effectiveness: *evaluators and researchers* comprise a fifth stakeholder group. There may be some overlap with the other stakeholder categories as when the consultants to the networking schools engage in research or evaluation. The function of this stakeholder group is thus to identify and collect data relating to process and evidence of impact.

Finally *policy-makers* comprise a sixth stakeholder group. Networks for innovation frequently aim to impact on the political framework to further the cause of school improvement. In order to create ownership and acceptance, they need to involve appropriate policy-makers at an early stage of the networking process.

4. The Role of Networks in Supporting Innovation

Networks in education have a key role to play in supporting innovation and development, and accordingly need to be regarded as support structures for innovative schools. They do this not only through disseminating good practice, but also in overcoming the traditional isolation of schools, and to a certain extent even challenging traditional hierarchical system structures. In the past, most school systems have operated almost exclusively through individual units – teachers, departments, schools or local agencies – and such isolation may have been appropriate during times of stability. But now in a context of change, there is need to "tighten the loose coupling" in order to increase collaboration and establish more fluid and responsive structures. Networks are an important means of doing this.

Networks do not just facilitate innovation: they can also be an innovation in themselves by offering the possibility of new ways of working. This is particularly important in contemporary educational systems, as there is a tendency to reduce "meso level" support for schools. It may well be that these support structures, traditionally provided by local education authorities or school districts, local universities, and other agencies, have often been more effective in buttressing the *status quo* than in supporting change. Even so, the meso level has become increasingly important in times of innovation and change, in the form of creative and responsive structures for working with and between schools, not as outmoded institutions.

Networks can thus provide a means of facilitating innovation and change as well as contributing to large-scale reform. They offer the potential for "re-inventing" the meso level by promoting different forms of collaboration, linkage, and multi-functional partnership – sometimes referred to as "cross-over structures". In this respect, the network enables stakeholders to make connections and to synergise activities around common priorities. The system emphasis is not to achieve control (which is impossible), but to harness the interactive capability of systemic forces (see Fullan 2000).

All the featured network cases in their different ways fulfil this function. The Good Hope programme as a government-supported initiative is directly linked into the policy agenda, but also promotes grass roots developments. The Durham District School Board together with the Learning Consortium creates ways of networking that support schools and engender local empowerment. The German Network of Innovative Schools as a large and significant national grouping is able to support wide-scale innovation in schools as well as influencing the national policy agenda. The IQEA project works effectively within a well-defined policy context and acts as a pressure group to persuade policy makers that educational reform needs capacity building. The French Observatory as an international network has influence across the European Union.

The analysis of the cases also suggests that networks need to be engaged from the very beginnings of a change process, as well as providing support once the process has been established; they have a role to play during all the phases of the change. For instance:

During the "*initiation phase*" *networks encourage:*

- shared commitment and ownership;
- leadership at a variety of levels;
- external facilitation;
- clear focus on goals and purposes.

During the"implementation phase" networks encourage:

- understandings about learning and the management of change;
- more flexible and creative use of space, time, communication structures, and people;
- social and technical support;
- early success and its celebration.

During the "institutionalisation phase" networks encourage:

- widespread collaborative ways of working;
- planning for "scaling up";
- the redefinition and adaptation of ideas through the use of evidence;
- internally useful data feedback and externally useful evaluation.

In sum, networks have the potential to support educational innovation and change by:

- Providing a focal point for the dissemination of good practice, the generalisability of innovation and the creation of "action oriented" knowledge about effective educational practices.
- Keeping the focus on the core purposes of schooling, in particular in creating and sustaining a discourse on teaching and learning.
- Enhancing change agent skills and abilities in managing the change process in teachers, leaders and other educators.
- Building capacity for continuous improvement at the local level, and in particular in creating professional learning communities, within and between schools.
- Ensuring that systems of pressure and support are integrated, not segmented; for example, that professional learning communities incorporate pressure and support in a seamless way.
- Acting as a link between the centralised and decentralised schism that results from many contemporary policy initiatives, in particular by contributing to policy coherence horizontally and vertically.

4.1. *Towards a Typology of Networks*

At the Lisbon seminar, it was apparent that networks could operate at a number of different levels; in reflecting on this range of purpose an evolving typology of network types emerged. At the basic level, networks facilitate the sharing of good practice; at the highest level they can act as agents of system renewal. This gives an emerging typology of networks.

- At its most basic level, a network can be regarded as simply groups of teachers joining together for a common curriculum purpose and for sharing good practice.

● At a more ambitious level, networks can involve groups of teachers and schools joining together for the purposes of school improvement with the explicit aim of enhancing teaching and learning throughout a school or groups of schools, not just of sharing practice.

● Networks can also serve not just the purpose of knowledge transfer and school improvement, but also join together groups of stakeholders to implement specific policies locally and possibly nationally.

● An extension of this way of working is found when groups of networks, within and outside education, link together for system improvement in terms of social justice and inclusion.

● Finally, there is the possibility of groups of networks working together not just on a social justice agenda, but also as an explicit agency for system renewal and transformation.

● Not all categories in this typology were reflected at the seminar, but it does provide a way of categorising networks as well as emphasising their potential role. It is explicitly situated within a systemic perspective and has implications for the role of governments and for policy.

5. The Role of Governments and Implications for Policy

In considering the relationship between governments and networks, it is initially attractive to seek to distinguish between those networks that are supported by governments and those that are not. Such a simple distinction, however, masks the complexity of the relationships and trivialises the potential synergy between policy aspirations and network practice. The five cases discussed at the Lisbon seminar illustrate this complexity well.

Two of the cases – Good Hope and the French Observatory – could for different reasons be described as supported by government, as they receive some governmental encouragement and resource. But, both networks foster autonomy and experimentation on the part of educational organisations and influence government policy and reform by their scale, results and methods. By way of contrast, the Durham School District Board/Learning Consortium and the IQEA programme could be regarded as being independent of government, which is true to the extent that governments did not establish them nor do they receive direct funding. Yet, these networks were established principally to assist schools in interpreting and managing centrally-imposed changes; their most successful schools are also those that not only pursue their own school improvement agendas but do so in a way that is complementary to governmental reform initiatives. In addition, both the Durham School District Board/Learning Consortium and IQEA subtly influence the process and substance of policy.

The German Network of Innovative Schools established by the Bertelsmann Foundation provides another perspective on the complex relationship between government and networks. To some commentators, this network was established in order to critique and, through success, directly influence government. Viewed more positively and strategically, it offers a model of a "public/private partnership" that could well be influential in future networking arrangements.

So, differentiating networks on the basis of governmental support risks oversimplification, particularly as in the future governments will use networks increasingly as a means of implementing their educational reform programmes. Despite the dramatic increase in educational reform efforts in most OECD countries over the past decade, their impact on levels of student achievement has not been as impressive as had been hoped. Admittedly there are pockets of success, such as the claims made for the English National Literacy Strategy, but in general the failure of recent reforms to accelerate student achievement in line with policy objectives has been widely documented (Hopkins and Levin, 2000). The main reason for this is because government policy on education has not been adequately informed by what is known about how schools improve so that an enormous source of synergy is lost and student learning lags behind its potential (see *e.g.* Hargreaves *et al.*, 1998). This provides a strong argument for governments to embrace networks not only to assist in the implementation of their reform agendas, but also as an innovation in its own right. Without doing so, it is likely that the aspirations of educational reform, particularly in decentralised systems, will continue to rise beyond the capacity of the system to deliver (see Hopkins 2001, especially Chapter 10).

The specifics of a policy framework for networking are beyond the scope of this chapter, but in line with the above discussion, it would focus on:

- How networks support both the adaptive implementation of reform, and also act as a vehicle for informing second level reform.
- How networks can become the agents of not just knowledge dissemination but of knowledge creation, transfer and utilisation.
- How networks can become increasingly effective locations for the professional development of teachers and as a means whereby schools can develop the capacity to better implement (and withstand) the reform priorities.
- How networks can ensure horizontal and vertical integration of support and coherence of policy by exploiting synergy between existing structures and creating new ones.

● How networks can support "scale up", especially when the purpose of the network is the dissemination of teacher professionalism or ethos, rather than a comprehensive curriculum and instructional programme.

● Above all, governments should insist that schools be thoughtful in their approach to change and improvement, but not necessarily require that everyone do the same thing in the same way at the same time. Networks are perhaps the best way we have at present to create and support this expectation of thinking.

The Lisbon seminar took place within the context of an OECD programme on Schooling for Tomorrow. The future of schooling requires a systemic perspective, which implies a high degree of consistency across the policy spectrum and an unrelenting focus on student achievement and learning. Networks, as a natural infrastructure for innovation and for informing government policy, provide an important means for doing just this.

Notes

1. Head of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit at DfES and former Dean of Education, University of Nottingham; rapporteur of the Portugal/OECD "Innovation and Networks" Seminar held in Lisbon September 14th-15th 2000.

2. At least one practitioner and facilitator represented each of these networks. In addition, a number of international experts was invited to participate in the seminar.

3. This draws on the analysis of Dr. Anne Sliwka, see Chapter 3.