Local Government Association

partnership approaches to sharing best practice

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Executive summary

Introduction

Partnership is a prominent theme in 21st century education. The idea of schools sharing resources and good practice is central to a number of current government initiatives, including Beacon schools, Specialist schools, Excellence in Cities (EiC) and Education Action Zones. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) was commissioned by the Local Government Association (LGA) to explore the range of partnership models now operating in English and Welsh local education authorities (LEAs). The aim of the project was to examine and assess how schools, supported by their LEAs, have been working together in different local partnerships to foster the development and spread of innovative ideas and share best practice for their mutual benefit. The focus was on partnership working *in general*, i.e. on the benefits and challenges for schools, regardless of the policy context.

Methodology

The research focused mainly on 12 LEA case-study areas. At least one LEA was selected from each of the nine government office regions (GORs) for England, and one from Wales. Six of the LEAs were EiC areas. In each area, key personnel with an interest or involvement in school partnerships were interviewed (32 LEA staff in total).

In addition, one further education (FE) college and 39 schools[1] (a minimum of two in each LEA) were visited; over 90 school/college staff were interviewed, and the views of over 100 students were collected via small group discussions.

School visits normally included:

- interviews with headteachers and/or senior managers
- interviews with a small selection of teachers in key coordinating, subject, liaison and pastoral roles
- small-group discussions with students about the learning opportunities that had emerged for them from their school being part of a school partnership.

Key findings

Many different types of partnership were encountered, including:

- transition partnerships, set up to help ease the path of pupils transferring from primary to secondary school
- links between schools and FE colleges, based on the development of a 14–19 strategy
- links between state and independent schools (less common)
- Early Years and Childcare partnerships, which included the LEA and social services department as well as providers of early years education in the voluntary, independent and maintained sectors
- groups of schools established (usually under the heading of a national initiative such as Beacon or Specialist schools) for the purpose of sharing good practice.

School partnership working could take many different forms. Partnerships could be:

- 'voluntary' (when schools decide to work together) or prescribed (established by the DfES or the LEA)
- 'horizontal' (member schools are perceived to be on an equal footing) or 'vertical' (one school is seen as sharing its expertise with a partner school)
- cross phase or single phase

[1] This comprised 19 secondary, 18 primary, one middle and one special school.

- cross sector or single sector
- geographical (involving all the schools in a single area) or subject based.

Given that an individual partnership may reflect any combination of these dimensions, it is clear that the range of possible models is very wide. It should be noted that partnerships can also vary in terms of size (from just two schools to perhaps 20 or more) and in terms of which school staff are involved. Some partnerships may be based on meetings for headteachers (or deputies) only; others may depend very much on individual members of staff (for example, in a subject-based partnership the key members would be the teachers of the subject concerned).

The LEA role in partnership working

It was clear that LEAs interacted with partnerships in a number of ways, depending to some extent on the nature and purpose of the partnership concerned. Active involvement of LEAs in partnerships tended to focus on any or all of the following areas:

- the bidding process (bringing schools together, writing bids and/or providing resources to enable school staff to do so)
- taking a lead role in the development of the partnership
- facilitating partnerships (e.g. providing resources or venues for meetings)
- providing funds or acting as a channel for funding
- monitoring partnerships to check their operation and achievements.

Benefits of partnership working

The perceived benefits of partnership working were seen as:

- wider collaboration – partnership working provided schools with new or increased opportunities for collaboration
- improved transition – some cross-phase partnerships were dedicated to smoothing the process of transfer from primary to secondary school
- the establishment of a network or forum through which teachers could meet to exchange ideas and share good practice
- increased opportunities for staff training and professional development – this was integral to some partnerships, e.g. those based on Beacon schools, but other partnerships organised training events that individual schools could not have afforded
- enhanced teacher confidence, due to the support received from colleagues
- additional funding and resources accessed through partnerships
- wider curriculum choice and/or a broader range of extra-curricular activities for students
- some interviewees believed that partnership working had had a positive impact on standards of student performance (others felt it was too early to be sure)
- in some cases, partnership working had led to increased involvement in the wider community.

Issues and challenges in partnership working

Although working within a partnership was generally seen in positive terms by LEA officers and school staff, they also identified a number of issues and challenges that had arisen in practice. These can be placed in two main categories: practical constraints (relating to time, funding or organisation) and issues relating to what might be termed school culture. The latter included:

- fear of the unknown – partnership working could require staff to work in new ways, and be open to perceived 'scrutiny' by other schools
- effective communication between schools, and commitment by all members of staff were seen as essential to partnership working
- schools had to learn how to be flexible and compromise
- personalities and previous cultures may not have been conducive to partnership working
- competition between schools – said by some to have been fostered by previous government policies – hindered collaboration, and some schools found it difficult to make the switch.

Transferability

Some respondents felt very confident about the possibility of transferring the methods they had developed and the knowledge they had gained through a partnership to other contexts. There was a general perception that even different schools could benefit from working together, because all had something to offer. However, there was a recognition that the good practice of others needed to be adapted to schools' own specific needs.

Characteristics of effective partnerships

Interviewees' ideas about the characteristics of effective partnerships included:

- stakeholders having a sense of ownership of the partnership
- a 'bottom-up' approach with everyone's views taken into account.
- clear and realistic aims and objectives, methodology and structures
- trust, honesty and openness between the partners, each school being realistic about its own strengths and weaknesses.

Several school-based respondents believed that LEAs had a key role to play in the practical processes of partnership and also in providing a source of vision and guidance for the schools involved. At school level, it was considered crucial that:

- senior managers should be committed to partnership working
- staff with key roles in partnerships should have dedicated (non-teaching) time
- the broadest possible range of staff within each school should be involved.

Conclusions

Partnership working demands time and commitment from member schools. However, the perceived benefits are considerable, and those involved generally regard it as worthwhile, despite the additional burdens it imposes. They welcomed the more open relationship with other schools, and the opportunities for raising attainment and improving the range of experiences offered to pupils.

1 Introduction: aims and objectives

Partnership is a prominent theme in 21st century education. The idea of schools sharing resources and good practice is central to a number of government initiatives and has manifested itself in many ways. This report summarises the findings from a research project sponsored by the Local Government Association (LGA) and undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), to explore the range of partnership models now operating in English and Welsh local education authorities (LEAs). Following a description of the background, this chapter outlines the aims and objectives of the project and the structure of the report.

1.1 Background

The current government has, through various policy documents, underlined its commitment to the twin policies of school improvement through diversity and through schools sharing resources and best practice. In the White Paper, *Schools: Achieving Success* (England. Parliament. HoC, 2001), it is stated that:

> *We also want to encourage schools to choose to establish new partnerships with other successful schools, the voluntary sector, faith groups or the private sector, where they believe this will contribute to raising standards.*
>
> *We would anticipate that a range of partnerships would be possible. For example, successful schools might share the benefits of particularly strong subject departments, FE colleges with a vocational specialism might work with schools in that area, faith groups might help build a school's ethos and the private sector could provide strong management support for schools, which are increasingly complex organisations to manage* (pp. 44–5).

A number of specific policy initiatives have been introduced which support this general aim of encouraging school partnership working. For example, one particular policy document focused on independent/state school partnerships and the benefits that could emerge through these (Bowes *et al.*, 1999). More specifically, Beacon Schools have a particular remit to share their effective practices with partner schools, with some evident success here, as the national evaluation of Beacon Schools, undertaken by NFER, has shown (Rudd *et al.*, 2001). Specialist Schools are also now mandated, as part of their community remit, to share their resources and good practices with other schools in their areas (Department for Education and Employment, 1998), although the OFSTED evaluation indicates that this has been an area of relative weakness within this programme (OFSTED, 2001).

Excellence in Cities, Education Action Zones and New Deal for Communities are just some of the other initiatives that have partnership approaches at the heart of their improvement strategies and are bringing different types of schools and partners in the private, social, voluntary and other sectors together in imaginative new ways. Some groups of schools, meanwhile, are forming themselves into local 'families' of schools for sharing and joint development purposes.

LEAs, as part of their longstanding management responsibility for local school systems and their more recent school improvement remit, have a key part to play in bringing their schools and other partners together for mutual benefit. This role has been recognised by the government, which has emphasised that LEAs have an important role to play in managing and supporting its partnership and school improvement agendas. In the document that set out a vision for the LEA role (DfEE, 2000), it was stated that:

> *The Government would like to see Local Education Authorities working with groups*

of schools, selected on a geographical or other basis, to see how far it is possible to devolve to such a group day to day responsibility for the school improvement functions of monitoring and challenge in relation to all schools within the group.

At the same time, there was recognition of the importance of the supra-school role of the LEAs to provide strategic, coordination and other support and ensure that the school partnerships met their improvement aims.

1.2 Aims and objectives

An initial scrutiny of the literature on school partnership working (see Chapter 3) showed that, despite the strong policy thrust, there was surprisingly little empirical evidence on the different types of school-based partnerships that have emerged with a sharing good practice remit and what constitutes effective practice in this area.

There have been numerous evaluations of partnership working within the context of specific policies and initiatives, but very little consideration of the pros and cons of school partnership working in general. It seemed an appropriate time, therefore, to undertake a research project which would explore the theme of partnership in depth. It was felt that such a project would help determine the best strategic planning and support stance that LEAs could take to ensure that they and their schools meet their development and improvement targets.

The main aim of this project, as indicated above, has been to examine and assess how schools, supported by their LEAs, have been working together in different local partnerships to foster the development and spread of innovative ideas and share best practice for their mutual benefit. The more specific objectives of the study have been to:

- identify, describe and assess different models of school partnerships for sharing best practice
- investigate the operation and interactions of the partnerships, the differing parts played by schools, the LEA and other partners and the challenges faced and solutions found
- more specifically, examine the strategic planning, coordination and other support roles of LEAs in these partnerships
- assess the nature and extent of the new learning experiences for students and professional development opportunities for teachers generated through the partnerships and the learning and other outcomes for students, staff and institutions that they have promoted
- identify the lessons and messages and examples of effective practice that can be drawn from this study for LEAs, for the guidance and support that they provide schools and school partnerships and for school managers.

1.3 Structure of the report

The next chapter describes the methodology used for this study of school partnership working. The following chapter reviews findings from research previously undertaken on the theme of school partnerships.

Findings from the present project are summarised in Chapters 4 to 9. Chapter 4 discusses the implementation of school partnerships by examining the organisational forms and structural contexts of partnership working and Chapter 5 examines in more detail the LEA role in encouraging and supporting such working. Chapter 6 outlines the perceived benefits of school partnerships and Chapter 7 discusses the issues and challenges involved. Chapter 8 considers the question of transferability – to what extent can models of partnership which have proved successful be replicated in a different context? Finally, Chapter 9 offers some conclusions and recommendations for school partnerships of the future.

2 Methodology

The research focused mainly on a number of case studies of different partnership models in selected local authorities. Originally there were to be ten case studies, but when the project was under way, it was decided to undertake two additional case studies in Excellence in Cities (EiC) areas, with funding from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). As part of NFER's evaluation of EiC, we were asked to investigate Beacon Schools, Specialist Schools and Education Action Zones (since these constitute three of the EiC strands) within the overarching theme of partnership. It was agreed by all parties concerned to combine these two activities, for the mutual benefit of both projects.[1]

The project built upon the methodology used in the single-LEA case study of Specialist School partnerships, sponsored by the LGA and the (then) Technology Colleges Trust[2] and supported by West Sussex LEA, which was completed immediately prior to the start of this project (see Aiston *et al.*, 2002). This evaluation of a school network (and partnerships within that network) in one geographical area, acted as a kind of 'pilot' for this national study, though the issues to be considered were somewhat different.

2.1 Literature review

Alongside the detailed fieldwork case studies (see below) a small-scale literature review was carried out as part of this project. A full-scale literature review was not possible and in any case, a more detailed consideration of the related literature was being conducted for another NFER project, on Networked Learning Communities. However, it was decided that there was a need to examine the (limited) literature that did exist on school partnership working. This literature was primarily of two types: firstly, studies that embraced some consideration of partnership working within particular policy contexts, such as evaluations of Excellence in Cities, Beacon Schools or Specialist Schools and secondly, more general studies on the principles and problems of partnership working.

There were some limitations regarding the usefulness of each of these sets of literature. The first set usually consisted of evaluations of a particular policy and therefore may not have been directly concerned with school partnership working, or took this as only one in a set of concerns. The second set consisted of studies that were often carried out in a different context, for example, with reference to a particular nation's education system, or over a different timescale. Nevertheless, there were some very useful indications of 'models' and of the possible benefits of partnership working within this literature and these are outlined in Chapter 3 of this report.

2.2 Selection of areas

In order to ensure coverage of a wide range and variety of case-study areas, it was decided that one from each of the nine government office regions (GORs) for England and one from Wales would be chosen as the first ten areas. A preliminary 'long list' was compiled, using the following information:

- researchers' knowledge of where interesting practice might exist, based on their previous work on Specialist and Beacon Schools, Excellence in Cities and other NFER projects
- information from the single-LEA case study of Specialist School partnerships and the literature search which was undertaken for that project
- information search by the Educational Management Information Exchange (EMIE) at the NFER

- LEA contacts and NFER liaison officers in authorities and key personnel in other educational bodies such as the Specialist Schools Trust.

The long list included two or three LEAs in each of the ten areas. Telephone contact was made with each LEA, leading to an interview with an appropriate officer who was asked to provide details of the partnerships currently in place. The kinds of partnerships we expected to find included:

- Specialist Schools
- Beacon Schools
- Education Action Zones (EAZs)
- Excellence in Cities (EiC) areas, or Excellence Clusters
- Diversity Pathfinders
- New Deal for the Community
- School Improvement partnerships
- Local strategic partnerships.

One of the aims of the initial telephone interviews was to record which of these partnership types were found within each LEA, so as to ensure that examples of each would be represented in the final selection of LEAs. However, we also wished to ascertain what other partnerships were operating, including any that might be unique to a particular LEA and which might extend the range of examples to explore.

The criteria for drawing up the final case-study list were based on such factors as:

- representation of different partnership approaches for sharing good practice
- range and numbers of schools and school types involved, including presence of Beacon, Specialist, faith and independent schools
- range of involvement of the LEA in terms of strategic planning, overall coordination, teacher and curriculum support
- involvement of other parties and services
- scope of partnership(s) in terms of its/their aims and activities covering, *inter alia*, sharing resources, teacher development and support, curriculum enhancement and/or institutional development.

The final list of ten LEAs included four which were also EiC areas. The inclusion of two additional areas in the project (see above) brought the total to 12 LEAs, of which six were in EiC. More details of the LEAs and the policies that were being implemented within them are provided in Section 4.1.

2.3 Case-study methodology

A researcher was allocated to each of the 12 case-study areas. The researcher's first task was to make contact with the officer already identified in the LEA and arrange a visit to interview key LEA personnel with an interest/involvement in school partnerships. Since the theme of partnership is broad and can impact on a range of LEA policies, it was impossible to identify a priori who such personnel might be. Thus the number of interviewees and their posts varied considerably from LEA to LEA and it was necessary for the research team to be flexible and adapt the interview schedules accordingly.

The occupational titles of the LEA personnel interviewees included Director of Education, Head of School Standards, Assistant Director, Principal Adviser, Head of School Improvement and EAZ Director. From one to eight individuals were interviewed in each of the LEAs and 32 LEA staff were interviewed in total.

LEA interviews focused on the LEA role in partnerships, including (as appropriate) strategic planning, management, coordination and overall support. Interviewees were invited to give their assessment of the effectiveness of the partnerships, any instances of good practice that would be worth exploring further and

any additional contacts who should be interviewed.

In the light of advice and recommendations gained during the LEA interviews, researchers identified a number of schools (primary and secondary) to visit in each area. Headteachers were contacted and asked if they were willing for their school to be included in the project. One FE college and 39 schools[3] across the 12 LEAs (a minimum of two in each LEA) were visited by members of the research team. Over 90 school/college staff were interviewed, mostly individually and face-to-face and the views of over 100 students were collected via small group discussions.

The number of schools visited within each LEA varied depending upon the range of schools involved in partnerships and the willingness of those contacted to take part in the research. In a few cases, where permission had been granted but arranging visits proved difficult, interviews were undertaken by telephone instead.

On school visits, the range of activities undertaken by researchers depended to some extent on the nature of the partnership being explored and the extent of the individual school's involvement. In general, however, visits included:

- interviews with headteachers and/or senior managers, to explore the specific role and activities of each school's involvement in the partnership(s), the range and type of linkages established, the key challenges faced and the benefits and drawbacks of partnership involvement for the school, staff and students
- interviews with a small selection of teachers in key coordinating, subject, liaison and pastoral roles, to cover such issues as: curricular linkages and the new learning experiences brought for young people, teacher interactions and their professional development; support provided by LEA, the Specialist Schools Trust and other bodies and outstanding support needs and their views of the pros and cons of the partnership(s) and the outcomes for themselves and their students
- on an opportunity basis, attendance at partnership meetings to observe the interactions occurring between the key players, the planning and operational issues being raised and the solutions adopted
- individual and small-group discussions with students about the learning opportunities that had emerged for them from their school being part of a school partnership.

There was considerable variety in the locations, roles and experiences of our respondents, allowing for triangulation of data sources. Although it would never be possible to capture the full richness of relevant perspectives and outcomes, the project design did enable the research team to collect information about partnership working and experiences of these partnerships from a range of different perspectives.

Notes

[1] This report presents the findings from all 12 case-study areas and addresses directly the aims of the original LGA-sponsored project, though references to EiC policy and practice are made where appropriate. A separate report, based on the six case-study areas that are also EiC partnership areas, addressing the particular contributions of Beacon Schools, Specialist Schools and Education Action Zones (EAZs), will be submitted to the DfES EiC team at a later date.

[2] The Technology Colleges Trust became the Specialist Schools Trust in January 2003, reflecting the fact that there are now 11 categories of specialist schools, covering most subjects in the curriculum.

[3] Nineteen secondary, 18 primary, one middle and one special school.

3 Previous research on school partnership working

As indicated in Chapter 1, one of the main motivations for carrying out the present evaluation was a lack of previous research into school partnership working. Detailed literature reviews conducted for other projects had revealed that there was very little extant research on partnership working in general and that the studies that have been carried out have often looked only indirectly at partnership working, have been predominantly theoretical, or have been carried out as part of an evaluation of a particular policy. This chapter briefly reviews this limited literature and summarises how this helps to set a context for the present study.

As already suggested, the research findings or reviews that do exist can be categorised in two ways:

- evaluations of particular initiatives that have included partnership working
- more general reviews of school partnership working.

Sections 3.1 and 3.2, respectively, consider publications within these two categories of the literature on school partnership working.

3.1 Other policy evaluations

The 12 LEAs featured as case studies in this project were overseeing a range of different policy initiatives that encouraged school partnership working. These include the Beacon Schools initiative, the Specialist Schools programme, Education Action Zones, Networked Learning Communities and Excellence in Cities.

Many of these initiatives have been (or are being) evaluated and reports are available that make assessments of the degree of success of these policies. The evaluations are not always directly concerned with partnership working, though often there are at least indirect references to how schools are working together within the policy initiative. Examples of such studies include the following:

- the national evaluation of Excellence in Cities
- the national evaluation of the Beacon Schools initiative
- a number of studies of the Specialist Schools programme
- an evaluation of Networked Learning Communities.

3.1.1 Excellence in Cities

A consortium consisting of the NFER, the London School of Economics and the Institute for Fiscal Studies, has been evaluating the implementation of Excellence in Cities (and many of its associated policies) since summer 2000.

Interviews with 56 EiC Partnership Coordinators, conducted between October 2001 and January 2002, provided an opportunity to explore notions of partnership working, both in general and between schools, within the EiC context. Within EiC partnerships six different models of working were identified (Pye *et al.*, 2002:11–3):

- the Leadership model
- the Facilitator model
- the Director model
- the Steering Group model
- the Strand Group model
- the Split Partnership model.

Some of these resonate with a number of points which LEA officers made in interviews

carried out for the present study, particularly the issue of whether the LEA should play a leading or a facilitating role (see the discussion in Chapter 5). When asked about the main benefits and successes of EiC, the coordinators identified five main areas of success, arising from the increased funding which EiC brought, two of which involved partnership working (Pye *et al.*, 2002:51–3):

- increased dialogue between partnership headteachers
- the movement of schools from an ethos of competition to one of cooperation.

These factors were also mentioned by some of the LEA officers and headteachers interviewed for the present study.

3.1.2 Beacon Schools

A team at the NFER has been evaluating the Beacon Schools programme since the first pilot Beacon Schools were established in September 1998. This evaluation has had a particular emphasis on 'the partner school perspective' and a number of relevant findings can be identified. For example, the DfES, the sponsors of the evaluation, asked for an exploration of whether there were particular 'models' of Beacon-partner school working and, based upon the perspectives of the school and LEA staff involved, the following four models were identified:

A. Dissemination: a solution looking for a problem
B. Consultancy: a customised approach to an identified problem
C. Improving together: creating networks of mutual support for excellence
D. Brokerage: the Beacon School brokering requests for help.

In the March 2002 evaluation report of the Beacon Schools initiative (Rudd *et al.*, 2002) the research team noted that:

> *There is considerable evidence that the more intensive work with partner schools (as described in Models B and C) is seen as, somehow, more 'genuine' as a partnership. The key features are that the relationship is seen as two-way and egalitarian... this type of model of working has arisen, to some extent, as a response to the perceived elitism some see as inherent in the initiative. Recent authors have, however, questioned whether 'equal' partnerships between Beacon and non-Beacon Schools can be achieved at all in an educational climate that has focused on competition rather than co-operation between schools and the 'unequal status' of Beacon Schools and partner schools.*
>
> (Webster, 2001)

Burton and Brundrett (2000) looked at the operation of the first tranche of Beacon Schools in the first year of the initiative and identified two main types of partnership working – a tight focus on a few partner schools (rather like the consultancy model mentioned above) and a single large-scale project involving a wider range of schools (rather like the dissemination model).

A very strong finding from the NFER's evaluation of this initiative has been the identification of a desire, on the part of both Beacon and partner schools, to work on a mutually-beneficial basis, rather than as one 'expert' school and one 'recipient' school. This finding is echoed in a number of studies of school partnership working.

The five-year NFER evaluation has also included detailed explorations of the perceived benefits of partnership working. The following five main areas of benefit for Beacon (and partner) schools were identified (Rickinson and Rudd, 2001) and are worth bearing in mind in the context of the present study:

- improving practice and (in some cases) raising standards
- staff development
- enhanced external links
- increased teacher and pupil morale
- more resources.

3.1.3 Specialist Schools

As noted in Section 2.2 of this report, the present project builds upon the methodology used in the single-area case study of Specialist School partnerships which was completed in West Sussex LEA prior to the start of this project. In this LEA there had been a history of collaboration (Aiston *et al.*, 2002:ii):

> *There was a consensus amongst schools and LEA advisers that the creation of a Specialist Schools network in West Sussex had been beneficial. As well as helping schools to build closer relationships with one another, the network was seen to be a source of mutual support and an opportunity for reflection. Schools also felt that they had benefited from sharing ideas with teachers in other schools and disseminating good practice.*

For this study a distinction was made between the network (consisting of the LEA and all the schools) and (school-to-school) partnerships:

> *Partnerships between schools were felt to be beneficial for both teachers and pupils. Primary partner schools, for example, were thought to have mainly benefited from access to physical resources and teachers and the partnerships were seen as helping primary pupils with their transition to secondary school. Working with a Specialist School also gave partner schools the opportunity for staff training and for the exchange of ideas and good practice.*

There was some evidence that primary schools did not gain quite as much from partnership working as the secondary schools, though, once again, the respondents stressed that they saw the most effective school partnership as being a two-way process.

There have been a number of other studies which have touched upon how Specialist Schools work with other schools. The specific advantages of partnership working identified in this context include the following:

- better sharing of resources and facilities (Groves, 2000)
- sharing of advice, support and ideas (Barnard, 2000)
- acting as a catalyst for change (Morris, 2000)
- providing new opportunities for out-of-hours learning (Whelan, 2000)
- promoting good practice in languages teaching and learning (Wicksteed and Hagen, 2001)
- promoting international work and the citizenship agenda (King, 2000)
- improving the pupil transition to secondary school and stimulating interest in particular subjects (Gillmon, 2000).

3.2 Partnerships literature review

A recent report based upon an evaluation of 'new ways of working' in LEAs identified 'partnership' as a potentially important 'building block', or method of working, for LEAs. Although this report was primarily concerned with LEA working, it also indirectly covered LEA-school relations. The authors make the point that 'partnership' is a widely-used term which appears to have *'too many meanings to be useful'*. Furthermore, *'Working together does not constitute partnership and parties to contracts are not necessarily partners'* (Indepen and Bannock Consulting, 2003:25). LEAs can certainly learn from each other, but: *'unless such efforts are well structured, well planned, well resourced and well funded they will not represent sustainable and worthwhile investments'*. The features of a successful partnership, according to the findings of this report, are listed as follows (p.26):

- its voluntary nature, stemming from a common understanding of the mutual benefit
- the sharing of resources, benefits, risks and liabilities with a reasonable balance of power (not necessarily equal)
- commitment and the ability of partners to commit other partners

- open books and the sharing of all relevant information.

Busher and Hodgkinson (1996) have made a similar point about the need for a shared balance of power in school partnerships. In a study of nine secondary and 11 primary schools in two Midlands LEAs, carried out in the period when Local Management of Schools (LMS) was in operation, they identified a number of benefits and problems arising from school networking. The main problem for the networks was the principle of *'subsidiarity'*: whilst headteachers recognised the need to collaborate, they also wished to preserve their school's autonomy. The main advantages of networking were *'informed support'* and the promotion of coherent education provision for local communities. They stressed that the principle of joint and equal ownership is a characteristic of effective partnerships. This can be encouraged through the rotation of 'chairs' and venues and through altruism on the part of the more powerful schools.

Lomax and Darley (1995) also looked at primary school partnerships (in five LEAs) at the time of LMS and concluded that this policy had indeed led to greater collaboration. Headteachers had been *'forced to take a more active part in organising inter-school links, particularly those involving clusters of schools throughout an area'* (p.158).

Mention should also be made here of studies that have looked at networks or partnerships of small or rural schools, though some of these publications are now rather dated. Such networks have often been set up to prevent isolation and for the provision of mutual support and, in a few cases, to prevent school closure (on the latter see Galton and Hargreaves, 1995; Thorpe, 1991).

Potter and Williams (1994) looked at primary school clustering in a Welsh LEA. They found that, although there were problems with finding the time for individuals to work together (and also problems with travel), these clusters did have numerous benefits, including curriculum enrichment and a reduction in professional isolation. Galton (1993) looked at a rural schools programme and found that it helped to reduce isolation for both pupils and teachers in small schools. The main issue, however, was the difficulty of keeping parents and governors informed about, and involved in, the partnership activities. The importance of involving parents in partnerships has also been stressed by Gillmon (2000) and Coleman (1998).

A number of studies of school partnership working have also been conducted with reference to the school systems of other countries, notably the USA. The Rural and Community Trust helps to form networks of schools across rural America. In one of its reports the Trust makes a number of interesting observations based upon consideration of how these networks operate, including the following:

- as networks develop, schools begin to connect more with the needs of communities (Rural School and Community Trust, 2000:3)
- successful networks can be thought of as 'ecosystems', they 'depend on keeping relationships in balance to maintain themselves' (p.9)
- networks and clusters of schools can be a catalyst for change, they 'can actually inspire movements' (p.29).

Ochoa and Henao (1997) make a distinction between 'academic' school networks, which are formal, 'romantic' networks, for which the basic purpose is to exchange knowledge in a friendly, informal manner and 'service' networks which are based on the use of databases and information exchange.

Hord (1997), investigating professional learning communities in the context of the USA's schooling system, noted that the principal tended to have a prominent role, but also stressed that there must be a sharing of leadership, power and authority.

So there are some recurring themes in these studies and overall, the literature, although limited, especially in terms of empirical evidence concerning the benefits and disadvantages of partnership working, offers considerable food for thought. Many of the issues (and models) raised within it also feature in the perspectives of the practitioners interviewed for the present project, as can be seen from the findings presented in subsequent chapters of this report.

4 Implementation of school partnerships

This chapter, through the use of first-hand information provided by the interview respondents, maps out the details of the actual forms of partnership working that the schools and LEAs were involved in. It outlines the range of national and local partnership initiatives featured and gives some indication of whether these were directed by central government, local government, or by the schools or headteachers themselves. There is also a section detailing the most common examples of links with further and higher education. Thus the chapter sets the context for the discussions concerning the benefits and challenges of partnership working in the remainder of the report.

4.1 National and local policy initiatives

As indicated in Section 2.3, attempts were made at the planning stage of this evaluation to ensure that all the main national and local policy initiatives that embraced or encouraged partnership working were included. This helped to ensure that a good spread of policy contexts (as well as geographical contexts) was covered, whilst at the same time keeping the focus on school partnership working *in general*. The table below sets out the details provided by LEAs of the national policy initiatives operating in the 11 English case-study areas (for details of what these initiatives involved, see also Chapter 3).

Comments made by the LEA and school interview respondents, identifying the actual initiatives within which school partnerships were operating, suggest that the evaluation did successfully cover a diverse range of partnership structures and formats. The following summary points can be made in this respect:

- of the school-based partnerships based on national policy initiatives, the most prevalent were those arising from the *Beacon Schools* initiative and the *Specialist Schools* programme: only one of the 11 English LEAs did not have Beacon Schools and only two did not have Specialist Schools

Table 4.1 Mapping of National Policy Initiatives in 12 Case-Study LEAs

LEA	Specialist Schools	Beacon Schools	EAZ	Excellence in Cities/ Clusters	Diversity Pathfinders	New Deal for Communities	Networked Learning Communities	Leadership Incentive Grant
A	√	√	√				√	√
B	√	√	√	√		√		
C	√	√	√	√				
D	√	√						
E	√	√	√	√	√			√
F	√	√						
G		√	√	√				
H	√	√	√	√	√	√		√
I	√	√						
J			√				√	√
K	√	√	√	√				
L	Not applicable (LEA in Wales)							

Sources: (1) information from LEA websites; (2) telephone enquiries conducted with the school improvement section (or equivalent) of each LEA in autumn 2002; (3) detailed interviews with LEA officers carried out in spring/summer 2003.

- the next most common nationally-designated format of school partnership working was the *Education Action Zone*: EAZs existed in eight of the case-study areas
- six of the 11 English LEAs were involved in the *Excellence in Cities* programme: three of these were Phase 1 EiC areas, so they had been involved since the inception of the policy, two were Phase 2 and one was Phase 3[1]
- two of the LEAs were implementing each of: *Diversity Pathfinders, New Deal for Communities* and *Networked Learning Communities* (NLCs)
- four LEAs made mention of the *Leadership Incentive Grant* (LIG) scheme as an initiative that was being used as a framework for partnership working.

Some of these policies were relatively new at the time the research visits were carried out, especially NLCs and the LIG, so it is likely that more LEAs took these up as the evaluation progressed. It should be noted that the table does not provide an exhaustive list of national policies that could provide a basis for schools working together. Other partnerships (that we did not specifically ask about) were identified: for example, 14–19 Learning Partnerships were mentioned by four LEAs, Early Excellence or Early Years partnerships were mentioned by three and networks of Advanced Skills Teachers were also mentioned by three. There were also, of course, many local school networking or partnership arrangements; indeed officers in all 12 LEAs discussed these at some length and further details are given in the next section.

Ultimately, the success or otherwise of these particular national policies was not a main focus for this evaluation (many of the policies are, in any case, being separately evaluated). The focus here, as expressed in the original aims of the project, was on partnership working *in general*, i.e. on the benefits and challenges for schools, regardless of the policy context.

4.2 History of school partnership working

LEA respondents were asked about the school partnerships operating in their areas. In addition to those listed in Table 4.1, interviewees described groupings of schools (known variously as families, clusters, or pyramids) intended to link schools in a given locality and/or promote primary-secondary transfer. There were also partnerships or networks focusing specifically on school improvement. Responses indicated that in terms of origins of school partnership arrangements (or networks) there are three important points that are worth bearing in mind:

- there was a mix of older, established partnerships and newer ones
- some partnerships (or networks) had their origins in the schools themselves and others needed more direction from the LEA
- in all of the LEAs (except the one Welsh authority) some degree of the 'drive' for partnership working had come from central government initiatives, such as those mentioned above.

Several of the LEA interviewees were at pains to stress that schools working in partnership together was nothing new (though the point was also often made that there was now *more* collaboration). For example, one senior LEA officer said: *'Partnership working has always been important in* [our borough]. *Partnership arrangements are built into the history of the borough'*. Another stressed that *'The Development Groups were set up six or seven years ago'* and a third said *'There has been a 14–19 Forum for the last ten years'*.

Of course, not all areas had a history of school partnership working or collaboration and there had been considerable competition between schools in some of the LEAs. This point was acknowledged by one officer who said that his LEA had recognised *'the need to*

overcome competition and promote collaboration... or it would end up with a combination of elite schools and sink schools'.

Where there had been a history of collaboration, the origins of the partnerships were often to be found in the communications of the schools themselves. Typically there were headteachers' forums that had been operating for some years – many of the new partnership arrangements were established on the basis of structures which already existed.

Often the level of LEA involvement with the schools was still being worked out (see Chapter 5), but in most of the LEAs there seemed to be light to moderate direct involvement, respecting the view that the main drive should come from schools. For example, one interviewee noted that *'There are four primary school clusters, managed by the schools themselves. LEA involvement in this is only by invitation'*. The names given to the school groupings varied, from clusters to families, from development groups to pyramids. But even in cases where the structure had been established by LEAs, it would still be necessary for schools to decide whether to use it as the foundation for an active partnership.

There was also some variation in terms of perceptions of how much 'drive' there had been, for partnership working, from central government policies. Most LEA interviewees were agreed that the various national policy initiatives identified in Section 4.1 above had contributed significantly to creating frameworks where it was easier and more likely that partnership working could take place: *'There has been a huge drive for collaboration at secondary level'*. But there was also a view that these national initiatives did not always take account of local histories and local variations and a number of LEA officers talked about 'customising' or 'adapting' these national requirements to bring them into line with local circumstances. Thus, one interviewee said *'There is a mix of DfES policies and local initiatives'* and another commented that the LEA *'did not simply follow government instructions...My view is that you have to take charge of these initiatives!'*

4.3 Links with further and higher education

Although the primary focus of the research was on school-school partnerships, there were clearly other types of relations that shaped the general collaborative context within which schools were working, notably multi-agency working (for example, where the education department of an LEA was working closely with the children's or social services section) and links with FE and HE.

Given the wide extent of LEA-school and school-school partnership working and the research focus of the present study, it was not possible to investigate these links in any great detail. It should be noted, however, that the great majority of schools featured had strong links with FE and HE institutions. These were often developed via 14–19 Learning Partnerships or via specific initiatives, such as the Increased Flexibilities programme. Further examples of these forms of partnership working, where relevant, are given in subsequent chapters.

Schools' links with universities were based primarily upon two forms of activities: student visits to universities (e.g. careers fairs or subject activities days) and, more commonly, teacher training placements. In terms of providing places for teacher trainees, many schools had a long history of working with particular universities and several school respondents reported an expansion in this aspect of their work. The headteacher of a large primary school, for example, reported that his school accommodated 11 teacher trainees each year and there were links with three universities. The school was also involved with School Certified Initial Teacher Training (SCITT).

4.4 Dimensions of partnership working

It will be clear from the earlier sections of this chapter that school partnership working can take many different forms. Visits to schools and LEAs confirmed this and illustrated the various dimensions of partnership working. These are summarised briefly below in order to provide a context for the discussion of the benefits and challenges of partnership working in Chapters 6 and 7.

Partnerships can be:

- voluntary or prescribed
- 'horizontal' or 'vertical'
- cross-phase or single-phase
- cross-sector or single-sector
- geographical or subject-based.

4.4.1 Voluntary or prescribed

Some partnerships are established by the DfES (for example, EiC areas) or the LEA (for example, pyramid structures to determine which primary schools should be main feeders for each secondary). Others may be purely voluntary and come into being when schools decide to work together for their mutual benefit. It should be noted, however, that although schools may have little or no choice about whether to belong to a 'prescribed' partnership, they can of course decide how active a role they wish to play in it.

4.4.2 'Horizontal' or 'vertical'

We use these terms to refer to partnerships in which member schools are, or are not, perceived to be on an equal footing. Some schools, such as Beacon or Specialist schools, are presumed to have particular expertise and it is part of their responsibility to share this with other schools. Most partnerships involving such schools may therefore be considered unequal, inasmuch as one school is seen as having something to give, which the other school can benefit from by receiving. By contrast, in 'horizontal' partnerships (such as transition partnerships,[2] or EAZs) schools work together on an equal basis; they may offer mutual support and share good practice, but there is no suggestion that one particular school will provide help or guidance for the others.

It should be noted, however, that partnerships which are predicated on the 'strong school/weak school' model may evolve into a more equal partnership. For example, NFER's evaluation of Beacon schools showed that Beacon partnerships worked best when there was a recognition that both schools could learn from each other (Rudd *et al.*, 2002).

4.4.3 Cross-phase or single-phase

Many partnerships (e.g. Networked Learning Communities, school improvement partnerships, Excellence Clusters and Education Action Zones) are organised cross-phase, giving primary and secondary schools an opportunity to get to know one another. Transition partnerships are by nature cross-phase, since their raison d'être is to facilitate links between secondary schools and their feeder primaries.

Other partnerships (such as those developed to deal with specific subject areas or topics) tend to be single-phase. Those encountered during the research included partnerships based on such topics as reading, literacy and numeracy, initial teacher training and raising attainment.

4.4.4 Single-sector or cross-sector

Most partnerships are single-sector, i.e. involving only educational institutions. However, the research provided some examples of cross-sector working, such as Early Years groups, which brought together childminders, nurseries, schools, the LEA and social services, in order to enhance provision and to reach out to parents and carers.

4.4.5 Geographical or subject-based

Some partnerships involve all the schools in a geographical area; for example, the heads of schools in an area may meet on a regular basis. Others may be organised to examine and develop teaching and learning in a particular subject area. Some Specialist Schools, for example, provided ICT teachers or technicians to help primary schools develop their expertise and maintain their systems.

Given that an individual partnership may reflect any combination of these dimensions, it is clear that the range of possible models is very wide. It should be noted that partnerships can also vary in terms of size (from just two schools to perhaps 20 or more) and in terms of which school staff are involved. Some partnerships may be based on meetings for headteachers (or deputies) only; others may depend very much on individual members of staff (for example, in a subject-based partnership the key members would be the teachers of the subject concerned). It is probably rare for a whole school staff to be actively involved in a partnership and the extent of their awareness may also vary (see Aiston *et al.*, 2002). This will depend partly on the nature of the partnership; for example, teachers of other subjects might not be expected to know about a small-scale partnership of geography teachers, while they would be expected to know about their school's membership of an EAZ. However, it also depends on the enthusiasm and commitment of senior managers and those directly involved in partnership activities.

Finally, it should be noted that individual schools may be involved in several partnerships and that partnerships may overlap in terms of membership. There may also be partnerships within partnerships: for example, a transition partnership may exist within an Excellence Cluster or an EAZ.

Notes

[1] A separate report, looking in more detail at partnership working in the EiC context and focusing upon these six areas, is planned.

[2] The term 'transition partnership' is used to denote a secondary school and its feeder primaries, which have chosen to collaborate in order to smooth transition for pupils.

5 The LEA role in partnership working

It was clear from the interviews with officers and with headteachers that LEAs interacted with partnerships in a number of ways, depending to some extent on the nature and purpose of the partnership concerned. For example, an LEA might have relatively little involvement in a Beacon or Specialist School partnership, but would certainly play a key role in an EiC area grouping.

5.1 Forms of LEA involvement

Active involvement of LEAs in partnerships tended to focus on any or all of the following areas:

- the bidding process
- partnership development
- facilitation
- the provision of support and resources
- monitoring.

5.1.1 The bidding process

LEAs and schools wishing to participate in national initiatives (such as Excellent Clusters, EAZs and the 14–19 strategy) often need to go through a bidding process to secure agreement and funding for the project. Where such bids were required, LEAs often took the lead because they had an overview of the schools in the authority and could approach those that were able and likely to participate. LEA advisers or inspectors were usually called upon to make significant contributions to the bidding process, while school staff who were contributing to the bid could be allocated resources to enable them to make time for meetings and for writing the bids. An officer described the LEA role in such processes in the following terms:

> *The LEA is the catalyst for it all – a facilitator, provider of inspiration and leadership. It created a vision of what was required without being prescriptive about how to achieve that vision...It is 'hands-on' where necessary and would provide an officer to support certain types of activity. It also sees its role as that of capacity building.*

5.1.2 Partnership development

In cases where LEAs had been involved in establishing partnerships, they would wish to ensure that the initiative developed as planned and they therefore tended to take a role in influencing, or even prescribing, that development. As one officer volunteered, the LEA was still viewed as the *'lead partner'* and its role was *'to draw all the threads together'*. Others spoke of the LEA having a *'strategic'* role or overview.

However, LEA officers often considered headteachers to be more appropriate leaders of partnerships, since they were closer to the daily management of school provision and more aware of their school's capacity to implement and contribute to partnership plans. In such cases, the LEA tended to set up consultations with headteachers to involve them in planning educational developments or their delivery, or provided support and opportunities for collaborative working and left the group to decide upon any new ventures. One LEA officer justified handing over management saying, *'schools will all become more confident when working in partnership... schools need to get better at this'*.

5.1.3 Facilitating

Most of the LEAs in the case studies viewed the support and facilitation of partnerships as an important part of their role, particularly in helping to ensure their continued success. One headteacher described her LEA's role: the adviser *'attends strategic and core meetings. Does some brokering with other agencies'*. A

number of LEA officers reported that, once they observed partnerships running effectively, they wanted to hand responsibility for their leadership and continued development to others and to provide them with opportunities to assume *'ownership'*.

If appropriate, the LEA might facilitate partnership meetings, perhaps providing a venue or funding cover for teachers. LEA advisers and inspectors often continued to be involved through the life of a partnership, perhaps keeping their distance but being ready to advise and support the partners where necessary. The headteacher of a school involved in an independent-state school partnership reported that the support of the LEA in her authority was *'huge, absolutely, huge. It just wouldn't work without the involvement of the LEA and its officers'*. However, a headteacher in another authority saw her LEA as *'supportive rather than pro-active... One development officer can sometimes find bits of money'*. In another authority, a headteacher explained that his LEA played, *'a good strong role. They'd really like us to do what they want but realise they can't make us. It's a good chance for us to get together and show them how what we are doing supports their educational plan'*.

It was noted that LEAs that were able to look back on a long history of partnership working, or collaboration, between their schools were also the most likely to say that schools tended to build their own partnerships. As a senior adviser in one such LEA reported:

> *We are an additional resource (on the outside) to help people come together and to support or challenge them...The LEA provides the partnerships with the central view, or pulls them together, or supports them: they can provide advice.*

Officers in some LEAs remarked upon the changing culture in education, through which schools had become less competitive and more collaborative, but this process appeared to be more difficult in areas where competition had been fierce until relatively recently. Sometimes, in such cases, officers felt that the role of the LEA was to *'reduce the competitive culture and to restore the public service ethos... because competition had gone too far'*.

5.1.4 Providing support and resources

Part of the LEA role was to provide funding, or act as a filter for it, although not all partnerships received dedicated funding. Indeed, one officer used this as an indicator of the authority's role; those partnerships that had a *'funding handle'*, e.g. from central government, would be *'planned by the LEA'*, while in other partnerships, their role would be *'more strategic, keeping a distance and allowing them to develop'*.

In addition to funding, LEAs provided resources and personnel to run training for teachers and arranged seminars and conferences to discuss and develop practice, whilst advisers were always willing to attend partnership meetings and provide advice to them. They might also buy in training for key staff, which could then be cascaded to others involved. Headteachers were often appreciative of the support they received from the LEA. One said, *'the LEA is exceptionally good, exceptionally powerful. It plays a good role as a facilitator, offering guidance'*. Some partnerships existed because groups of schools had allocated some of their own budgets in order to fund a common project they had agreed would be worthwhile.

5.1.5 Monitoring

LEAs also had a role in monitoring partnerships, both to check that they were still operating and to ensure quality. One officer said that the LEA recognised the need to monitor what was happening and to ensure that *'things are kept moving'*, especially because it was often apparent that not all partnerships were proceeding at the

same pace. Indeed, this officer added that the LEA *'is currently reconsidering whether to continue to stand back or whether to take a more pro-active role'*. A headteacher in the locality had recognised this dilemma and remarked that the LEA had not yet decided whether they were to be facilitators or managers. He added that it would be helpful if they were more pro-active in supporting partnerships, especially in being *'more assertive'* when dealing with headteachers who tended to remain competitive. Monitoring was often carried out in relation to the authorities' Education Development Plans (EDPs) and this is discussed in more detail in the next section.

5.2 How partnership working fits with Education Development Plans

LEA officers usually tended to take the view that partnership working fitted well with their EDPs. Indeed, a number said that their plan would not work without the contribution of the partnerships: as one said, it was *'fundamental to the success of the EDP'*. A senior officer in one LEA explained that one of the aims in the authority's EDP is to share good practice and experience. At the same time the partnerships addressed the aim of improving key stage 2 to key stage 3 transition, *'we know that if we are going to drive standards up, then better progression and links are required'*.

An officer with responsibility for an Early Years partnership said that it *'contributes towards the LEA's commitment to build and develop a quality provision'*. In another LEA, a 14–19 partnership was described as *'part of a strategy to increase participation post-16 and to provide a wider range of opportunities which address the needs of a broader range of people'*. However, one officer admitted that there was a gap between the EDP and what the schools in his authority would like: *'currently, there is not a tightness between what schools want and what the EDP offers'*. This appeared to be a minority view, however, and most officers were very keen to see partnerships operating in their LEA, viewing them as essential to the success of the EDP: *'...it's the only way! Previously, there was too much focus on individual schools.'*

A majority of the officers interviewed said that partnership working was a central requirement of their EDP. An officer in one LEA provided this example: *'The LEA has a Local Education Standards Strategy. Creating these partnerships was one of its goals to develop the city as a learning city'*. In a number of cases LEAs quoted from their EDP 'priorities', showing that they referred to partnerships, as the following two quotations from interviews with officers illustrate:

> *Priority 4 is 'Promoting Learning Partnerships' – this is a full section of the Action Plan.*
>
> *It hits at least five of the seven EDP priorities, e.g. EDP5 encourages collegiality, sharing, etc.*

LEAs demonstrated their commitment to partnership by developing their EDP in close collaboration with schools. This was described by a senior LEA officer as a time-consuming, but high-quality, consultative process; however, she added that, *'we couldn't have delivered the EDP in any other way than a partnership arrangement'*.

LEAs' and partnerships' roles in regard to the EDP varied from one authority to another. For example, some LEAs developed their plan and then invited the schools to participate, whereas others had included schools in the planning process. A principal adviser explained the process in his LEA: *'The LEA shares the strategy with schools. Heads are involved in an annual review of the LEA Action Plan.'*

While the majority of LEAs appeared to be firmly committed to partnership working, it was apparent that the development of such practice was often still in its infancy and there was a good deal more that could be done. A senior adviser, who admitted that his LEA had

more pressing priorities, explained his thinking about partnerships:

> *We have an integrated plan for education. The EDP is just part of this. There is a huge section on consultation and collaboration. It's a huge area for development...*[The next EDP would be] *...narrower, more focused.*

5.3 School partnership activities

LEAs described the various ways in which their schools worked together in partnership. These involved differing degrees of LEA assistance and included:

- teacher groups meeting to develop provision for particular groups of children, subjects or key stages
- sharing subject teaching
- organising timetabling across schools to facilitate teacher/pupil exchanges
- timetabling common non-contact time to enable key teaching staff to meet
- collegiate activity days/weeks
- organising/participating in joint training/professional development
- sharing overall management and/or financial management.

In the secondary schools, the catalyst for the development of partnership working was often the regular meetings held by headteachers and those held by deputy headteachers. These meetings, which were supported by the LEAs, provided opportunities for headteachers and deputy headteachers to discuss a broad range of issues shared by schools and often led to an agreement to seek remedies that could be applied jointly.

Primary schools in rural areas tended to have low pupil numbers and sometimes insufficient finances to provide enrichment activities, because there were not enough pupils to justify an additional member of staff, or to fill a coach for a visit. Forming partnerships with other nearby schools in a similar situation enabled them to pool resources and thereby to recruit additional staff and organise trips to cultural venues.

A number of schools collaborated through meetings in which teaching staff developed teaching materials or exchanged ideas about particular subjects. Primary schools, for instance, were often involved in partnerships that were developing resources for improving literacy. In one LEA, for example, six lower schools were working together and sharing data, focusing on children's writing. An officer from an LEA that had promoted collaborative working for many years remarked that, 'most partnerships grow out of a particular curriculum initiative or through the interest of an inspired, innovative teacher who wants to do something'.

There were also partnerships between schools which had contacts at transition points, at the transfer between primary and secondary education, or from first to middle schools and middle to upper schools. The main reason for such partnerships was to familiarise children with their new schools and to help make the transfer as stress-free as possible. In some instances, the visits enabled primary teachers to share information with the secondary schools on the work children had been doing at key stage 2.

Partnerships also existed between schools and other institutions involved in providing early years' childcare. These enabled teachers and other providers to share information and good practice, as well as learning more about how each of the providers operated. Similar exchanges also took place between schools and teachers responsible for teaching and caring for students with special needs, while in one authority an LEA officer remarked that sharing experiences had been particularly helpful for schools in difficult circumstances. In this authority groups of *'needy schools'* had met to *'share perspectives and finances'* and another group of teachers teaching in *'turbulent schools'*, with transient student populations, had also met together to discuss ways forward.

In an authority where the LEA had taken a more central role in partnerships, schools with weaknesses had each been 'paired' with a school that was achieving well so that teachers could learn from the 'more successful' school. In some cases the 'successful' schools were Beacon Schools and the LEA had acted as a 'broker' between the schools. There were also examples of Specialist Schools working with the LEA in order to establish which other local schools they could most usefully collaborate with.

Some schools had progressed a little further down the road of partnership working and joint curriculum development by encouraging teachers from the Development Groups to share subject teaching. Fourteen-to-Nineteen partnerships operated in another way, with students attending college for part of the week, in order to study vocational courses that were not offered by the schools. According to an adviser in one authority, this partnership came about because of recognition by schools that they needed input from colleges, as they could not broaden the curriculum and offer vocational subjects alone. If teaching is to be shared across schools, it is important to ensure that timetables are synchronised so that time can be allocated for staff and pupils to attend the lessons. A few of the partnerships had recognised this as an issue and were trying to discuss joint timetabling; sometimes the LEA provided support for these meetings.

Organising and/or providing opportunities for meetings, joint training and continuing professional development (CPD), including programmes for school governors, teaching assistants and other staff, were often viewed as tasks for LEAs. Both LEA officers and headteachers mentioned the key role that such provision had for partnership working. LEAs were said to be well placed to have an overview of schools' and teachers' needs regarding networking and training, particularly because they had a monitoring role and tended to oversee large-scale initiatives. An LEA officer remarked that his role was to *'bring coherence to CPD'*. However, some school and Early Years partnerships had organised and financed their own inservice training (INSET) and in such cases the LEA was usually invited to help by providing facilitators or trainers, or by providing information which enabled partnerships to recruit well-qualified trainers.

Sharing overall management and/or financial management was frequently mentioned as a role for partnerships: as one officer explained, a small school partnership pooled funding for collaborative ventures that were *'informing practice'*. However, the officer also pointed out that a role in management and financial management was equally likely to be attributed to LEAs. In his authority the LEA occasionally *'pump-primed'* a partnership (e.g. a key stage 4 development project) and also provided a *'strategic manager'*.

Partnerships that took on the overall management and financial management of their group nevertheless tended to ensure that the LEA was well briefed on their activities. One such partnership, that had recruited its own coordinator to manage the day-to-day activities, invited LEA officers to briefings and information-sharing meetings, where their input was valued by the other participants. In another LEA, an officer remarked that, *'headteachers regard partnership working as a means of working with the LEA'*.

The role of LEAs in leading partnership working was also mentioned by the officers. For example, a senior level officer pointed out the benefits of having school partnerships led by his authority, saying that the LEA had *'created a bigger picture where schools were more apt to work in partnership...*[Previously] *the LEA was working with individual schools on a one-to-one basis.'*

Most LEA officers appeared to be encouraged by the climate of cooperation and collaboration that was engendered by partnership working and, as one officer

remarked, schools too viewed them as important and were endeavouring to keep them going. However, in one LEA where partnerships were perhaps not so far advanced on the educational agenda and where improving standards took priority, an officer admitted that collaboration was not foremost in the mind of teachers: *'Our secondary headteachers are still operating in a mentality of competition, which seems to date back about ten years'*.

The next chapter reports on the perceptions and views of LEA officers, headteachers, teachers and students relating to the benefits of partnerships for the schools themselves.

6 Benefits of partnership working

Chapters 4 and 5 have described the many and varied forms of school partnership encountered and demonstrated the ways that they were organised. This and the following chapter examine school partnerships in more depth, looking at the benefits and challenges of such working respectively.

The emphasis in this chapter is on the benefits of school partnership working in general, as identified by LEA officers, headteachers, teachers and students in the 12 featured areas. It is acknowledged that there will be variations in the perceived advantages of partnership working depending upon the nature and type of partnership being operated (see the discussion of partnership types in Section 4.4). Having said this, there was a good deal of commonality and the benefits identified can be grouped under nine main headings:

- wider collaboration
- improved transition
- a network for sharing good practice
- staff training and professional development
- enhanced teacher confidence
- additional funding and resources
- improved opportunities for students
- impact on standards of student performance
- benefits for the community.

6.1 Wider collaboration

Partnership working, by definition, involves collaboration. However, a point that was repeatedly made by interview respondents was that such working provided schools with new opportunities and more opportunities to collaborate, in greater depth, with other organisations, both within the educational community and outside it.

Many interviewees made reference to the changing climate in education, pointing out that, a few years ago, schools were fiercely competitive. Therefore, collaboration with partner schools or community organisations was often seen as an achievement in itself. One comment by a headteacher emphasised this feeling of achievement: *'There is a great sense of being part of something bigger (and it is bigger than just the local community)'*. An interesting example of the benefits of collaboration, mentioned in more than one partnership, was their 'muscle' in being able to influence events. One headteacher talked of having *'strength in numbers'* to influence the LEA. Respondents also stressed the advantages of reciprocity in partnership working. One headteacher said that they had *'learned as much from partners as we have given, if not more'*. Another headteacher agreed and said *'it's two-way, we have learned as much from them as they have from us'*.

The most frequently mentioned type of collaboration was the *transition partnership* between feeder and transfer schools. These links were set up to help ease the path of pupils during transition (see Section 6.2). As one headteacher put it, *'...transition arrangements from the primary schools to the secondary school have been made a lot easier'*.

Another common form of collaboration was the development of a *14–19 strategy*. This had led to schools and FE colleges building closer links in some LEAs. One headteacher praised their local project particularly because it had *'opened up a new dialogue with the college'*: this dialogue was seen as very important and one worth sustaining.

A few links were found between state and independent schools. These had provided opportunities for activities in which students from the two sectors learned and worked together. Describing one such activity, involving participation in music-making, a headteacher said that *'...it was good for our students to work with those from a different culture'*.

In the pre-school sector, an *Early Years and Childcare partnership* linked a range of early years' settings, including voluntary, private and maintained providers and also included the LEA and social services department. It was reported that the partnership had fostered a greater awareness of other providers and of how the voluntary and private sectors function. One respondent said that they had *'learned how to be more flexible within the maintained sector'*.

Another form of collaboration was manifested in those formal groups of schools, usually set up under the heading of a national programme or initiative, that were *sharing good practice*. These included Beacon and Specialist Schools (and their partners), Networked Learning Communities and the scheme for appointing Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs).

In one school, for example, staff reported that they had definitely gained from Beacon status: *'We have been able to push the school forward. It's helped our staff to get to know teachers from other schools'*. In another school, the headteacher was enthusiastic about ASTs, saying they were effective in promoting partnerships: *'They have organised family workshops bringing in primary school children and their parents'*. The school coordinator for a Networked Learning Community said the partnership had given the school 'direction'. In his opinion, *'... it has given us a channel to put expertise into other schools*...[and]...*the opportunity to share good practice and celebrate success'*; he added that, *'there is definitely a climate of collaboration and sharing'*. Further examples of collaboration taking place under these formal arrangements are provided in the following sections.

6.2 Improved transition

One of the most common forms of collaborative working, as noted above, was the transition partnership. These cross-phase partnerships have provided students with a more rounded experience to help ease the move between schools. Several teachers reported that their school had developed a programme which helped children to settle into their new schools by, *'giving them the chance to meet all the teachers they are going to have, so that when they come up they feel more settled'*. A teacher remarked that partnerships were a good way of bridging the gap so that, for pupils, arriving at secondary school *'...is no longer a leap in the dark'*.

Visits often took place between staff who were responsible for new pupils in transition from one institution to another. Finding out about the teaching methods that pupils were used to and what had already been covered in the syllabus, enabled schools to tailor provision to suit more closely the needs of their new pupils, which could ultimately lead to happier and better motivated pupils. One secondary headteacher mentioned *'pastoral benefits, e.g. continuity of expectations, consistency in behaviour'*. In another school (a primary), the headteacher explained what the achievements of a transition partnership had been for them:

> *Secondary school teachers have become more familiar with the kind of work done in primary schools and have developed an understanding of the skills and aptitudes which children develop at primary school. This has meant that there is less evidence of the 'starting from scratch' mentality in the secondary school and their work is planned accordingly.*

A high school teacher echoed these comments in discussing what the partnership had achieved for her school:

> *An understanding and an insight into how year 6 pupils work and their curriculum and teaching and learning styles. For pupils, they settle in more quickly, are more confident because they know some of the staff when they come here.*

According to the headteacher, these transition arrangements would have further benefits: '*This should have an impact on the performance at KS3, given that work will no longer be repeated.*'

This was an example of how discussions between transition partnership members had helped them to develop programmes to enable them to fit the requirements of all partners. Another example was evident in a partnership where primary school headteachers did not want the partner secondary school to focus on literacy and numeracy when year 6 pupils came to the school. An agreement was reached to cover other subjects, including French and science, and resources and training were made available to primary school teachers so they could develop the subjects further before and after the transition visits.

Transition arrangements sometimes included summer schools in which pupils from the primary school visited the secondary school to attend lessons. In one LEA an adviser said that the summer schools had contained '*some brilliant stuff*' *for year 6 primary pupils, who felt, '...special – it raised their expectations'*. A joint project between another high school and partner primaries had introduced French in year 6 and this was reported by the MFL coordinator to lead to an increase in pupils' confidence when they started learning the language in earnest in year 7. It also gave pupils an opportunity to meet teachers in the secondary school, prior to joining, which added to their confidence, '*they will have seen a few faces before they come into the establishment*'.

Transition partnerships were also leading to the sharing of more data between schools about the pupils and their performance. As a head of year 7 commented:

> *We know an awful lot about the students before they even come...It has got to be beneficial, meeting students' needs, whether it is pastorally or whether it's special educational needs. If we didn't pass that information on, if we didn't make it available to those that need to know, sensitively of course, then we would be working from a blank sheet.*

In some partnerships this sharing of the information had been taken a step further and they had a common format for recording the data, which was of great help to the schools receiving the new intake.

It was also reported that primary school staff could benefit from these links. While students were able to interact with different teachers, staff got together too and were networking and gaining new ideas. According to one secondary teacher, primary teacher visits to the school also enabled them to see '*the other side of education, they are completely different, aren't they!*'

Some secondary schools saw working together as a source of recruitment opportunities; as a teacher commented, 'it gains hugely through building up a good rapport with the feeder schools. This helps them gain the students for the school'. By contrast, in another area, it was noted that partnerships helped to prevent boundary/catchment area and recruitment rivalry. As one headteacher stated:

> *The leadership group... heads and deputies – has dealt with things through collaboration. It is extremely good. There is a great deal to gain from working together.*

Partnership working could improve transition at 16 years of age, as well as at the primary-secondary changeover. Gaining a better understanding of the new cohort of students

was also a perceived benefit for an interviewee at an FE college which was participating in a 14–19 partnership. This respondent felt that he had gained an insight into *'where students come from'* with regard to their study habits and learning skills.

6.3 A network for sharing good practice

Partnership working provided benefits for teachers by giving them a forum through which they could meet with other colleagues and exchange ideas. Teachers were able to examine similarities and differences in their ways of working and to look at how partner schools approached particular subjects or issues.

One headteacher interviewee said that, in her view, a key dimension of partnership working was the availability of *'networks and opportunities'*, adding that *'Gifted and Talented links* [were] *made which we may not have been able to make otherwise'*. Another headteacher said that staff had *'learned a lot more from each other than the original intention might have been, in areas additional to that of the project'*. There were also opportunities to visit schools with different characteristics; a deputy head remarked that:

> *personally I think it's very good visiting schools as every school is very different. For example, I'm visiting a monocultural school, whereas mine is multicultural.*

Sharing practice often led to new ideas. One headteacher remarked that their partnerships led to: *'synergy. If we have five teachers working together they come up with more creative solutions'*. Sometimes schools shared the development of ideas and approaches through an intermediary, such as an external teacher or instructor. An EAZ partnership had enabled schools to obtain the services of a dance teacher who visited each school in turn, bringing them together at the end so that students could participate in a joint performance. This was considered valuable for the students, who could see how other children had approached the same activities and staff had benefited too.

The networks could be used not just to share good practice in teaching and learning, but also as mechanisms for identifying common school policies. One headteacher referred to a *'commonality of practice'* and said that in his partnership, the main result, so far, of collaborative working was the development of common policies for exclusion, school dinners, health, curriculum and data exchange and a home-school agreement.

Networking and visiting partner schools offered other advantages to staff, especially in rural areas, where staff worked in small schools or in small subject departments. Networking via INSET workshops, for example, provided mutual support for teachers and enabled them to overcome feelings of isolation. Sometimes they were in a very small minority in their own school and they found that it was good to have opportunities to exchange ideas and experiences with other teachers teaching the same subject.

A deputy head explained that, *'... we have the advantage of going into* [other] *schools. The head is very keen on us visiting, as being a teacher can be very insular'*. Another headteacher made a similar comment, noting that a benefit of collaboration was gaining: *'an understanding of the wider world. Schools can be so insular and inward-looking'*. The headteacher of an independent school particularly welcomed the opportunity for her staff to overcome isolation and meet with teachers from the state sector; *'from a teacher's point of view, it is good to network with other people and to see people operating in a different environment'*.

6.4 Staff training and professional development

According to our respondents, enhanced professional development has been a major

achievement of partnership working. Indeed, one headteacher went so far as to remark that *'professional development has been gained from all of the projects the school is involved with'*. Broadly speaking, the new professional development opportunities were of two types: those that were provided via national initiatives (such as Beacon Schools, Specialist Schools, Excellence in Cities, EAZs, or AST networks) and more specific training events or courses that were set up locally, usually addressing particular training needs.

Partnerships organised through, or as a result of, national initiatives, often included an element of training for staff. *Beacon Schools* were mentioned by some interviewees in this context and one deputy head explained that the whole teaching staff had received training from a Beacon School on the use of the interactive whiteboard. In another Beacon School, the headteacher praised the partnership initiative for the training provision and for its impact on teachers:

> *We have had the opportunity to be led by some excellent speakers which we couldn't have afforded otherwise and we have been able to do it – not in a rather shabby hall, but in an environment that showed teachers that they were valued.*

Another school that was a member of a Beacon School consortium and an EAZ reported that they had benefited from staff training sessions: *'there have been lots of benefits from the teaching and learning strand of the EAZ; much staff training and development'*. Specialist Schools' programmes had also been instrumental in assisting teachers' professional development in several of the schools visited.

The Director of an Education Action Zone said that *'all of the INSET has been linked up with partnerships. All staff are involved'*. He added that amidst a great deal of professional development in areas such as citizenship, there had been shared guidance and common provision. Another partnership based on Excellence in Cities had delivered professional development through the Gifted and Talented strand: *'There has been training in every subject area.'*

Another initiative, introducing Advanced Skills Teachers, had also contributed to staff development in partnerships, both through ASTs' role in advising and coaching others and in the gains in confidence that AST status gave to those appointed. One headteacher enthused:

> *Let's just take ASTs. They have been one of the best innovations in schools – gets to the heart of the issue. What matters most in schools is the teaching and their job is to develop and share good practice with our own staff and staff in other schools.*

Other national initiatives which respondents indicated had involved new professional development opportunities included the two National College for School Leadership programmes on Strategic Leadership of ICT (SLICT) and the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers (LPSH).

Outside these centralised initiatives, schools working together also provided local economies of scale that enabled them, as a group, to organise training events that could not have been afforded individually. Staff at all levels were able to take advantage of training and professional development opportunities. In one of the case-study areas, for example, a geographical partnership based on small schools sharing resources had organised training for classroom assistants.

There were several instances, like this, where joint training had been organised and made available through partnerships. In some cases teachers from a member school provided the training, while in others the partnership was able to buy in expertise because of the pooling of some finances, or through a levy system to which all members subscribed. The use of 'home-grown' trainers had fostered the professional development of the staff involved. For example, one school reported that, *'staff also trained other staff...*[they]

have learned new techniques and broader thinking'. Another school had arranged INSET for two partner schools and a local FE college:

> *We have organised practical sessions... on reducing teacher workload. The other schools had practical ideas to contribute as well. It was very good for the professional development of the teacher who led it, as well as for the other schools.*

A creative arts project with a wide remit for professional development had been the catalyst for a re-think about teaching methods and an intense staff development programme, in another LEA area. The headteacher appreciated the achievements so far, saying that the project was embedding professional development into the culture of the school and was fundamentally changing how to facilitate learning:

> *...getting away from teaching as mechanical – to it being more intellectual, innovative and creative – to think about child-centred learning.*

A training course for school middle management was the focus of a secondary school partnership. This training provided teachers from partner schools with a course that was highly valued and with excellent networking and sharing opportunities that were seized upon by the participants. One participant said that the experiences had been 'invaluable' and had prepared her for a new role as head of year in the following school year. According to another teacher participant, the achievements of this middle management course were:

> *The approach, the influx of ideas...we are all individuals and all have a creative element...You pick up specific, common and practical approaches which are very achievable.*

A number of partnerships had involved schools in the delivery of initial teacher training (ITT). Apart from having extra teachers, albeit those in training, this was also helpful in recruiting staff; as one teacher said, *'students have been here on placement and decided to stay'*. In another school an interviewee noted that having student teachers in the school allowed some of the other teachers time to reflect. In addition, those teachers who were mentoring the trainees were provided with time to examine their own practice.

6.5 Enhanced teacher confidence

For teachers, in particular, a major achievement of partnership working had been the support they had received from colleagues, which in turn had often led to an increase in confidence or a boost in morale. This had also happened at the school management level. One headteacher reported, for example, that the school staff had gained confidence in regard to working collaboratively and that they were now more willing to meet and work with staff in other schools and to develop leadership in that way.

Teachers frequently reported that they had received good support from colleagues from other schools as a result of collaborative working. One headteacher indicated that: *'...it's actually reduced staff isolation a lot, e.g. KS1 teachers work closely together – it helps their confidence'*. Another remarked that, *'It is nice to have a mutual support system'*, while the co-leader of a Networked Learning Community said that, as a result of partnership working, teachers had *'gained a level of confidence to be able to articulate what we do well'*.

Two newly qualified teachers (NQTs) involved in partnership working also reported that they had gained in confidence. One, who was working in a partnership based on the arts, admitted that she had not felt confident teaching the arts when she first came to the school, but had since gained from interacting with others: *'... there are five of us teachers to bounce ideas off each other'*.

Visits to other schools enabled teachers to compare their ways of working with their

peers, to share concerns and to realise their own worth; as one remarked, it is *'nice to see that other teachers face the same difficulties'*. A headteacher whose staff had provided support for partner schools reported that, although the partners were reluctant at first, they had now realised what they could gain from the partnership. She reported that the feedback she had received indicated that:

> *their own staff felt reassured and valued. I hope they have felt that someone has listened to their difficulties and tried to be practically helpful.*

As noted above, collaborative working also helped headteachers to benefit from the support of their peers. For example, one said that she had benefited from working with *'a superb colleague'* and from having good brainstorming sessions with other headteachers. The headteacher of an independent school mentioned the spirit of friendship and cooperation that existed with colleagues in the state sector. She gave an example of how she had contacted a partner state school to find out how they approached an inspection, prior to one on her school site. There had been no problem in asking other schools for advice and vice versa because of the *'spirit of collegiality'*.

6.6 Additional funding and resources

Many respondents acknowledged the usefulness of the extra funding and resources that were often gained through participation in formal partnership initiatives or arrangements. Being a member of a partnership also provided schools with economies of scale which enabled them to fund activities, both to enhance students' learning and to resource staff training. The availability of shared facilities, including technological equipment, sports halls or arts resources, was also an important benefit. One headteacher said that schools had made *'better use of resources, facilities, staffing and expertise'*; while another interviewee, a teacher, remarked that *'there have been very genuine two-way reciprocal arrangements.'*

The process of bidding for partnership funding can be time consuming, but was also mentioned by headteachers in a positive light. Some saw writing bids as a staff development opportunity, or as a way of celebrating a school's successes to date. As one headteacher said: *'staff here are quite modest, but having put forward a case for a Beacon bid makes you reflect on practice and on your strengths'*. In an environment where organisations increasingly had to make bids for involvement in new projects, those that had already been successful had gained valuable experience: *'people have learnt the language of bidding'*. An Early Years partnership also reported they had learnt a great deal: *'it has helped us be more aware of government initiatives, how to access funding'*.

The additional funding and resources accessed through partnerships provided schools with a number of benefits. They often enabled a school to do *'a little bit extra'* or to try something out. As one headteacher enthused:

> *I will give you some real examples – access to new pupil learning materials, also to new teacher materials. There is a website that provides these resources.*

A head of music said that, in his department's most recent partnership:

> *...we gained access to a composer in residence – a practitioner in that particular field. If you get someone who earns a living at composing, it is a more tangible benefit.*

Specialist schools had often developed superior accommodation that could help enhance subject teaching and improve the experiences offered to students. In such cases, partner schools were invited to share lessons or activities and to make use of the facilities. There were examples given of primary schools benefiting from work with specialist arts and sports colleges. For example, the principal of a community college reported that:

The primaries have definitely benefited from our Arts College work. They have had access to our resources and facilities and made use of our specialist staff. Effectively, we've been helping primary schools to get out of literacy and numeracy strategies [i.e. helping to broaden their curriculum].

Specialist School status had provided funding for sports facilities in a number of schools, while in others, teachers had benefited through partnership funding of ICT training. One particular partnership that was mentioned in a number of schools was the interactive whiteboard initiative. Teachers appreciated both the extra electronic equipment that had been provided and the training that accompanied this new facility. The training had provided teachers with essential skills they could employ to widen and update their practice and to enhance students' experience of learning; as one headteacher averred, *'the whiteboard initiative has had one of the greatest impacts of anything we have ever done'.*

Sometimes the resource sharing took the form of summer schools provided for primary school children, prior to joining a secondary school. Many examples were encountered of year 6 children spending a day or more at their local secondary school, in order to familiarise themselves with the school and the teachers and to learn what would be expected of them in the following year. In such cases, it was the primary pupils who were benefiting by taking advantage of the secondary school's resources, although there was also some evidence of secondary pupils gaining confidence when they were given the responsibility of looking after a primary school child during a visit.

6.7 Improved opportunities for students

Achievements for and by children were a central aim of most of the partnerships and interviewees reported ways in which they had already benefited. One headteacher, for example, indicated that participation by pupils in collaborative activity was always of benefit: *'most importantly, every pupil who has taken part has gained as an individual.'*

The degree to which students felt the impact of partnerships depended, to some extent, on the aims of the partnership and the nature of the collaborative activity. For example, some projects directly brought together students from different schools to share an activity; while for other projects, such as those concerned primarily with teachers' longer-term professional development, the impact on students would not have been so immediately apparent.

Some headteachers spoke of the benefits of partnerships to students in terms of providing them with more opportunities to think about how the different things they were learning related to each other. One of the teacher interviewees agreed, adding that partnership activities had improved pupils' questioning, speaking and listening skills. Some of the students made a similar point, reporting that they had benefited because, *'you can express ideas'* and they were *'learning about what other schools are doing'*.

A mentoring programme in a school in an EiC partnership was reported to have given pupils the opportunity to work with skilled adults. A similar point was made in another EiC school where it was indicated that provision for disaffected children had achieved some success via a mentoring scheme which had the *'input of people from a variety of backgrounds'*. Peer mentoring also had widened pupils' horizons because they were able to take ownership of the scheme, which made them feel special and important; as a teacher remarked, *'It's getting people in to help children believe in themselves'*.

It is perhaps worth noting at this point the distinction between the benefits of partnership activities and the benefits of partnerships per se. Mentoring schemes, for example, could be implemented by individual

schools and thus do not depend on partnerships (though funding accessed via partnerships may be necessary). By contrast, increased opportunities for pupils or training for teachers may be dependent on the existence of a partnership to provide the necessary expertise and/or resources. However, the distinction can be a subtle one and it is not surprising that interviewees talked about both types of benefit.

One potential advantage of partnerships as such is that they can provide wider curriculum choices for students. This was evident, for example, in 14–19 partnerships that provided increased curricular options for students who might otherwise be disaffected. The achievements of the 14–19 strategy were, according to the principal of a community college:

> *New opportunities for students... enhancing/ diversifying curriculum provision post-14, meeting the needs of students...[including] the work-related dimension of the curriculum.*

Links with FE colleges through such partnerships were valued by students and it was suggested that the learning style suited them; they provided students with a totally different environment and teaching in smaller groups and, as one headteacher remarked, *'additional courses, diversity of experience and improved motivation'*. EiC and Excellence Cluster partnerships were also able to offer wider curriculum opportunities. These were sometimes, but not exclusively, made through provision for Gifted and Talented students.

Sometimes students benefited from extended or additional curriculum activities. A partnership of small primary schools had been able to share curriculum extension activities through working together to develop new subject materials and resources. This same partnership had also been able to provide curriculum enrichment, in the form of additional activities for children, because the shared resourcing enabled them to buy in services that they could not have afforded alone. Other partnerships on curriculum development were found, including those looking at changes at key stage 3 and key stage 4.

A large proportion of the partnerships examined provided students with opportunities to meet with others from neighbouring schools. Headteachers suggested that these events were useful because they gave students the chance to compare their experiences with others. Students were also taught by teachers from other schools and in a different setting, as one headteacher explained:

> *Getting experience of a wider range of teaching staff, teaching styles, facilities, courses and the fact that they are operating in a different context has just got to add to their enrichment.*

One group of students said that working in partnership with other schools had helped them to learn because other students had different experiences, systems and ways of learning and, because they were the same age, were easier to talk to. The headteacher of another school reported that students had enjoyed meeting their peers from other schools so much that they had asked for further opportunities to do so.

A partnership aimed at extending opportunities for students taking A-level art had arranged for students to spend a few days in a museum, accompanied by a visiting artist. This event had been held for a few years and the headteacher said that:

> *the activities have all been meaningful... For example, the art students have got lots of work done, working with others and getting the expertise of the arts adviser.*

A teacher in the same school spoke about a music partnership, saying that it benefited the students:

> *socially, working with students they had not worked with before...It took them out of*

their 'comfort zone' ... the workshop set it apart from other courses, marking it as something special'.

6.8 Impact on standards of student performance

While some of the partnerships investigated had been operating for several years, many were in their first or second year of operation. Headteachers were asked to comment, in a general sense, on whether or not partnership activities had contributed to raising standards of pupil performance in their own or their partner schools. Some headteachers expressed a view that standards had been raised, while others said it was too early yet to make a judgement. About half of the LEA officers interviewed thought that partnership working had, or would in future, improve pupil performance; the remainder tended to think it was too early to make a judgement.

In some cases, schools were able to identify particular activities and resulting performance gains. For example, primary schools had worked together to provide literacy projects which were leading to improvements in speaking and writing; as one headteacher remarked, '*partnership teaching is the single most important thing in improving performance*'. A teacher told of how her pupils had self-evaluated their literacy project and was confident that it had improved their speaking and listening. Transition partnerships were described by a number of teachers as a way of overcoming the dip in performance that occurs in the beginning of key stage 3, as children adjust to a new regime in the secondary school. Some schools were able to refer to assessments already made; for example, one school had had a '*very positive*' internal assessment and another had a good OFSTED report and could claim a '*positive atmosphere*'.

Improved national test results were mentioned by three primary schools. One headteacher qualified his response by saying that, although results had improved, this was not simply a reflection of the work done by the cluster partnership. In his view, it would be difficult to say categorically that the improvement would not have come about without the work of the cluster. He added, however:

We are a partnership that helps each other. Whether it will raise the level of pupil achievement is another issue. It is about honesty and accuracy in measuring what they are doing and developing strategies to help each other.

One interviewee reported that the school's test results had improved and had reached the national average for the first time. This was seen as a major achievement for the school. A primary school teacher from a partnership involved in an arts-based development project said it had achieved '*loads: children's achievements and learning outcomes in particular*'. It had also raised the children's expectations, which were now '*much higher*'.

A few schools gave other specific examples of activities that they considered had provided gains in pupil performance. These included:

- ICT supporting sixth form students through a virtual link to an expert teacher in another school in a Networked Learning Community
- arts/drama workshops that had taught new skills and improved self-esteem and confidence
- sports partnerships with Specialist Schools that had led to measurable improvements in performance in sport
- music workshops that had improved performance and confidence.

Many of the schools admitted that it was too soon to point to actual gains in test or examination results but offered evidence of changing pupil motivation or self-esteem that they expected would lead to improved performance. Partnership working was said to

have brought about clear improvements in pupil motivation and engendered more positive attitudes, the social skills of some pupils had improved and there had been increases in confidence and self-esteem. A number of schools referred to the way that partnership working had increased the expectations of students, teachers and parents, or provided enrichment, while one headteacher said that improvements were not just academic, *'the benefits are social, experiential, transitional'*.

One teacher reported a general improvement in expectations: *'expectations are raised as the school becomes more public: children's and parents' expectations, school environment, standards of display etc.'* Attainment was not always restricted to academic success, as the headteacher of another school pointed out. He mentioned an AST, a sports specialist, because of the positive effects of his work. Young people from the local community were being brought into the school and:

> *offered a whole range of activities to increase the range of sports and to encourage young people to participate and increase participation rates in sport.*

According to the headteacher:

> *The benefit is that we get motivated youngsters who are willing to come up and take part. Also, if they feel good about themselves, that feeling transfers to their performance in other subjects.*

Sometimes the benefits to students from partnership working were not immediately discernible, as was the case with collaborative teacher professional development, but this did not mean that there would not be benefits from these activities at some point in the future. Headteachers were keen to point out the longer-term benefits that the *'shared and growing experiences of staff'* had for students; as one said, *'Pupils don't know yet – but good teaching will impact (eventually)'*. A teacher agreed:

> *if teachers benefit and gain more skills and learn different approaches, then we can pass things on to students, to increase their learning.*

6.9 Benefits for the community

The extent of school involvement in the community varied. Some headteachers acknowledged that there was little community involvement, especially where the school had been addressing other urgent priorities, but others described how partnership working had afforded new opportunities for staff and students to work beyond the confines of the school boundaries. LEA officers tended to take the view that one of the aims of partnership working is to strengthen schools' links with their local communities and thus work towards a shared understanding of the purpose and benefits of education.

Some schools were physically integrated with other community services. For example, nursery schools, adult education services, libraries and youth centres might share the site, but this did not necessarily mean that there was a high degree of communication between these institutions and the school, or with other institutions in the partnership. There were, however, some examples of growing links with the community through a few partnerships, as illustrated below.

A partnership between a special school and a comprehensive school, both of which had Sports College status, had led to a great deal of community involvement, especially regarding health and fitness, according to one of the headteachers. Their facilities were open during the evenings and weekends and they had also placed a strong focus on health education.

An Early Years partnership was also increasing involvement in the wider community, by sharing their expertise with schools and other providers through training, advice and

outreach work. Their activities had led to the re-planning of provision for children under the age of 11 in the LEA, to provide *'all round family provision from nought to 11-year-olds'*. In this partnership, collaborative working was viewed as a means of providing valuable help to a deprived community. It had raised aspirations and ideas about what was possible for both staff and parents; for example, *'more parents are thinking about job opportunities and are undertaking (ICT) courses'*.

Partnership working had also opened up schools to closer inspection by other schools and the community, which had led to a feeling of greater responsibility on the part of staff, as a headteacher made clear: *'because if the school has a lot of external people coming in, then they have to make sure that practice within the school is good'*. A deputy headteacher from another school admitted that his school had had a poor reputation until quite recently. However, opening the school and welcoming teachers from other schools had helped to improve this reputation. A teacher at this school commented:

> *once people come into the school they realise that what they see is not like what they were hearing; it helps to dispel the negative image.*

Where community working was occurring it was bringing benefits, both for schools and the wider community. Generally speaking, however, this was probably one of the less-well developed dimensions of school partnership activity – community links were not mentioned by the interviewees as frequently as, for example, professional development or benefits for students. Bringing about all of these improvements, of course, required time, energy and effort on the part of the partnership participants and partnership working was not without its challenges – these are considered in the next chapter.

7 Issues and challenges in partnership working

Although working within a partnership was generally seen in positive terms by LEA officers and school staff, they also identified a number of issues and challenges that had arisen in their practice. These can be placed in two main categories: practical constraints and cultural issues.

7.1 Practical constraints

Interviewees identified a number of overlapping practical constraints relating to partnership working. They included:

- time restrictions
- the additional demands of partnerships
- funding
- organisation.

7.1.1 Time

For the majority of interviewees, the main difficulty associated with involvement in a partnership was time. Statements such as *'There are always challenges of time...'* and *'Time is always an issue'* were frequently made by both LEA and school-based staff. School staff who already had considerable workloads were concerned that partnership working usually added to the existing demands on them, while no additional time was provided for them to address the requirements of the partnership. A deputy headteacher reported that *'People are already over-stretched.'* Allocating or making time was often seen as fundamental to the effectiveness of a partnership. One headteacher said that *'The main challenge has been finding the time. The partnership has meant heavy commitment.'* A further example was provided by a manager of an Early Years Centre who reported that *'The only real issue is time. It is very time-consuming to be genuinely involved...'*.

This issue was also echoed by LEA staff. A Principal Adviser acknowledged that the decision-making process is inevitably slower in partnerships:

> *Partnerships are hard work... They are more time consuming because consultation and negotiation take time.*

7.1.2 Additional demands

Both LEA and school staff also felt that the requirements of the partnerships were demanding.

Releasing staff to enable them to become involved in the partnership and then finding supply cover for them was felt to be particularly difficult. A head of English suggested that *'It gets complicated when you have to pull teachers out of lessons'*. This concern was reiterated by many other members of staff; for example, a manager of an Early Years Centre stated *'...there are difficulties when I want to release someone so that they can be a part of it as well.'*

The issue of releasing staff to be involved in partnerships was not perceived as being equal for all sectors. It was often suggested that this was more of a concern for primary teachers than secondary. A head of year explained:

> *Primary teachers don't have non-contact time as we do in secondary schools. Teachers would like to cooperate...but it's a question of who covers.*

Schools were involved in a large number of initiatives as part of the partnerships and this was also thought to be problematic. A headteacher reported *'The sheer number of meetings can be daunting'*. This point was supported by another interviewee who said *'It is difficult to get to all those meetings and keep up with all the initiatives.'*

From a wider perspective, LEA staff found the large number of partnerships that had been developed to be excessive. A Director of Education suggested that there may be too many partnerships and some *'should be revisited to assess their worth'*.

The effectiveness of some partnerships was called into question by many of the LEA staff interviewed. A Senior Standards Adviser argued that, in addition to the *'huge initiative overload'*, it was proving difficult to identify the impact of the partnerships and the initiatives.

> *We have difficulties identifying impact... there are too many strands and schools don't see across the board improvement.*

It was suggested on several occasions that the partnerships were not as active or effective as they could be and therefore did not achieve as much as was hoped. A Director of Education said: *'The partnerships need to be used better.'* Additionally, a Senior Standards Adviser stated that *'Partnerships are definitely an area that needs further development.'*

7.1.3 Funding

Both school and LEA staff agreed that funding was a central issue for partnership working. For example, a headteacher suggested that:

> *The main issue is funding. If there was going to be an expansion* [of partnership working]*, there would need to be a much higher level of funding including for things such as training and development.*

A similar view was provided by an LEA adviser who stated that *'Partnerships require proper funding.*

For schools the most significant funding issue related to the cost of supply cover for the staff involved in the partnership. A teacher maintained that *'Finding the funding to support partnerships is difficult. There are funding implications regarding cover supply for staff.'* This was echoed by an assistant headteacher who argued that *'Funding is essential to help free staff so they can work together.'*

As well as needing additional funding, some school staff also felt that existing funding had sometimes been unevenly distributed, which created difficulties for certain schools. A headteacher suggested that there might be financial tensions because *'A larger school sometimes finds that it is subsidising smaller schools in the partnership group'*. A further example was provided by the headteacher of a junior school who argued that *'The high school has had KS3 money and the junior hasn't. The partnership work and funding have been aimed at the high school.'*

Financial tensions and misconceptions were also found between schools and LEAs. It appeared that, although LEA staff agreed that more funding was needed, resource issues made it difficult for them to be completely financially responsible for the partnerships. For example, a Principal Adviser maintained that:

> *A disadvantage is the funding. Schools seem to believe that the LEA has the resource to pump prime partnerships. I worry that schools see partnerships as worthwhile only if the LEA brings in the money.*

7.1.4 Organisation

Organising the meetings necessary for partnership working was found by school staff to be challenging. The logistics of finding a suitable location and time for all those involved proved to be an arduous task. One headteacher stated that *'At a practical level, in a very, very busy world, it is difficult to get five people from schools in five LEAs to get together.'* In support, a teacher suggested that:

> *It requires effort. You have to get out there. We all work in different locations and it is difficult to get out there and meet people and maintain a partnership.*

The LEA staff highlighted similar challenges relating to the coordination of the partnerships and an EAZ director maintained that *'There is a challenge of coordinating things across schools'*.

7.2 Cultural issues

A number of other issues which may affect the success of partnerships were identified. These related to what might be termed school culture and included:

- fear of the unknown
- communication and commitment
- learning how to be flexible and compromise
- personalities and previous cultures
- collaboration versus competitiveness.

7.2.1 Fear of the unknown

A number of LEA staff found that securing the participation of schools in the partnerships was a challenge. One frequent difficulty was the need to persuade schools that the partnerships were beneficial. An EAZ Coordinator explained that *'It's about winning the hearts and minds of schools. There are one or two schools that don't want to be a part of it.'*

One major reason put forward by both LEA and school staff for non-participation in the partnerships was the concern of moving into the unknown. A teacher suggested that *'Philosophically, it is a new way of working, which can be quite scary.'* This view was echoed by a headteacher who explained that:

> *There has never been a cross-phase project like this in the area before so it's a case of coping with the politics of new ways of working.*

The possibility of being required to work in *'new ways'* was found to create negative feelings towards the partnerships themselves. One teacher reported that *'I am aware that often teachers may resent the project because it suggests other ways of working.'*

Concern at moving into the unknown extended to working with different sectors. For example, the headteacher of an independent school felt some hostility from others in the partnership: *'It's the resentment of others who want nothing to do with you because you are independent. They are opposed to the concept of independent education and cannot see a benefit in it.'*

The *'openness'* associated with partnership working was also highlighted as being a concern. Some staff members felt that the partnerships opened up their working practices to scrutiny from other schools. As one teacher explained, *'It opens schools up – it's brave for schools to do this because they become open to scrutiny.'* The Head of School Improvement in an LEA stated that *'People can't hide things any more. It's now more transparent.'*

7.2.2 Communication and commitment

Commitment by all members of staff was perceived as being crucial to the effective running of the partnership by many of the school staff interviewed. A teacher suggested that what was required was, *'A commitment from all schools. Each school needs to want to be a part of it and want to give as well as take.'* In addition a headteacher stated that *'There has to be genuine willingness for a partnership.'*

The extra work that partnerships created was one reason why all those involved had to be committed. For example, a headteacher argued that *'You have to be committed – you have to believe in it because it does add a burden.'*

Good communication between the schools involved in the partnership was also thought to be important for its effectiveness. An NQT suggested that *'We need to listen to each other. Schools aren't talking to each other. There is a lack of communication.'* One head felt that keeping the lines of communication open between the schools was a real challenge.

7.2.3 Flexibility and compromise

Because partnerships involved different types of school that were often working towards different expectations and goals, learning how to be flexible and compromise was considered by a number of interviewees as being vital for partnership working. A headteacher stated that *'Partnerships can be cosy and unproductive. They do require a degree of compromise. Sometimes you have to consider institutional policies versus partnership priorities.'* A further example was provided by another headteacher who said *'You have to be prepared to compromise. You can't follow your own agenda. You have to put aside some of your own school policies.'*

7.2.4 Personalities and previous cultures

The previous culture of the LEA in terms of partnership working was perceived to be an important factor in developing new partnerships. For example, one headteacher maintained that:

> *There is a tradition of partnership and community schools here which makes things easier. It would be much harder in an authority with nothing to draw on.*

In addition to previous cultures, the personalities of those involved were also considered to have a significant effect on the functioning of the partnership. When asked what challenges and issues had emerged from partnership working, an LEA Head of School Improvement felt that:

> *Some of the heads have strong personalities which can get in the way of collaboration and the previous culture of the LEA didn't encourage partnership working.*

This was echoed by a headteacher who argued that *'There must be compatibility in terms of vision. If leaders are not coming from the same point, it doesn't work.'*

7.2.5 Collaboration versus competition

It was suggested that collaboration between those involved in a partnership was often hindered by competitiveness. *'There is tension between being very competitive and working collaboratively'*, said one headteacher. An LEA officer stated that:

> *The main barrier has been competition for pupils and staff. The problem is this – people are quite willing to share if they are not competing with each other.*

A number of school staff argued that collaboration was difficult because in many areas schools had been made to compete. For example, a headteacher argued that:

> *Previous government policies have prompted a sense of competition between schools with the result that some are reluctant to engage in partnership working if it is felt to undermine their own positions in the league tables.*

Likewise, another headteacher claimed that:

> *There is a political issue. First it was competition amongst schools now we have to switch to collaboration with schools. We need to trust each other.*

8 Effective partnership working

Partnership working is not a new concept for schools and it was evident that some of the partnerships represented in the research had been operating for some years. This chapter reports interviewees' responses to three questions.

- To what extent did they consider their partnerships innovative?
- How easily could their partnership arrangements be transferred to other contexts?
- What are the best ways of developing effective school partnerships?

8.1 Innovation

Perhaps surprisingly, the majority of those interviewed believed that the kind of approaches that they were developing were innovative, either in content or in the methodology which they had adopted.

Examples of innovative practices varied. According to one school, *'being innovative is having a good idea and piloting it'*. Several partnerships had enabled schools to examine the experiences of schools in other areas and in different countries. Schools had developed new approaches to teaching and learning that had influenced the way in which the curriculum was delivered throughout the school. Others had involved new departures in the use of ICT.

The way in which several partnerships had provided teachers from different schools with opportunities to meet, discuss and share good practice and to work together on joint projects or initiatives was said to be an important innovation. There had also been opportunities for NQTs to meet together. Some partnerships had brought staff responsible for teaching different phases of education together for the first time: this had given the participants a new perspective on their own work and education in general.

A number of those interviewed said that the partnerships in which they were involved had become more innovative as they had gathered momentum. Several interviewees attributed this to the way staff had become more confident as they became more familiar with the work of the partnership. One school felt that this would lead to a greater willingness to be innovative, as other schools saw what could be accomplished.

Some interviewees identified features which they felt were essential if schools were to be able to work in ways which were innovative. One important factor was the need for them to enjoy enough freedom of action and to be able to experiment in the knowledge that not everything would prove successful. For instance, one school emphasised that it was important that *'things were not done in a judgmental way'*. For this to happen, support structures needed to be put in place, including a commitment from school senior managers. *'It needs driving and managing, it needs commitment. You need someone who has the vision to want to make things better'* said one respondent.

Even so, not all of the activities in which the partnerships were involved could be described as innovative. Some were innovative only for particular localities, given that they had been tried successfully in other areas. However, this did not diminish the importance of the development for the schools concerned.

A note of caution was sounded by some of those who took part in the research, as they were concerned about the way that developing new practices could put additional burdens on staff. According to one *'You can take on too much. You must be*

selective and not try to go for all that's out there'. Another said *'there is such an intense pressure on teachers, they don't have time for "blue sky thinking", they need the space for this to happen.'*

8.2 Transferability

Some respondents felt very confident about the possibility of transferring the methods they had developed and the knowledge they had gained through a partnership to other contexts. According to one LEA officer:

> *I do not look at partnerships as being structural, organisational. Partnerships can cross geographical boundaries. Partnerships are based on relationships, they're not based on mechanisms and structures. A successful partnership is based on personal relationships – they will only work as well as the people involved and their commitment... A good partnership is based on trust and understanding.*

A belief in transferability was frequently held where there had been a focus on issues common to all schools within a partnership, for example, the use of ICT. Approaches to teaching and learning were also felt to be transferable; one teacher said that she would use the kind of approaches that had been developed in her school through the partnership, in any other school in which she worked.

Those who had had positive experiences felt that teachers in other schools would benefit from seeing what they were doing. They felt that this would be much more likely to happen as staff became convinced that what was being introduced would benefit the pupils both in terms of attainment and attitudes. At the same time, it was felt that staff needed to be convinced that the kind of work which the partnership was undertaking would make their life easier before they agreed to adopt those methods of working.

It was felt that LEAs had a role in supporting the transfer of good innovative practice and that they should deploy adequate resources to ensure that this took place. For example, it was suggested that LEAs should have dedicated advisers who would be responsible for ensuring that good practice developed by one partnership was adapted and applied successfully in other contexts.

However, some respondents felt that LEAs faced difficulties when seeking to support school partnerships, especially in cases where the schools concerned were competing for pupils. According to one, this made it difficult for the LEAs to play a pro-active role:

> *LEAs deserve to know where they stand... The government has not made it easy for LEAs, they're trying to work out where they stand vis-à-vis their schools'.*

This meant that many LEAs were not at present *'necessarily a catalyst for collaboration.*

8.2.1 Schools in different circumstances

While partnership working and sharing practice between schools with similar characteristics may be fairly straightforward, it is possible that difficulties might arise if the partners are dissimilar. Interviewees were therefore asked to comment on the feasibility of sharing practice with schools with different characteristics. Varied responses were given.

The majority of LEA and school staff were very positive about the ability of schools with different characteristics to share good practice. A Principal Adviser argued that *'It is the main reason for the partnership. Schools with different characteristics can share and learn from each other.'* In support, a headteacher said that *'The range of schools involved suggests that different types of schools can share good practice.'*

Even where difficulties were anticipated, they did not always materialise. An EAZ Director suggested that *'The differences are sufficient to potentially cause problems, but they don't seem to...'*

There was a general perception that even different schools could benefit from working together, because all had something to offer. A headteacher suggested that *'There is a lot you can learn from each other.'* This view was echoed by another headteacher who argued that *'Every school has a strength and we have to tap into this.'*

A third headteacher warned that differences between schools should not be used as an excuse to avoid working together: *'You have to be careful of copping out by saying that schools have different characteristics.'* Indeed, some interviewees thought it more beneficial to work with dissimilar schools. As an assistant headteacher explained, *'It works better if they are different. If they are too similar they may be competitive.'*

There was, however, a minority of respondents who doubted that good practice could be shared with schools that had different characteristics. According to one LEA representative, *'Some partnerships are unique – You cannot always move them'*. Similarly, a headteacher observed:

> *Everything depends on individual circumstances. You cannot take a situation like the one here and replicate it somewhere else. It doesn't work like that.*

Even those who held that dissimilar schools could benefit from sharing good practice did not necessarily believe that you could simply replicate a particular situation in a different context. There was recognition that the good practice of others needed to be adapted to schools' own specific needs. According to one LEA officer *'No one model fits all. Good partnerships adapt to local needs and priorities.'* This view was echoed by many schools. A number of staff thought that the kind of work with which they had been involved would have to be adapted to meet the needs of schools facing different circumstances and they felt that this could be done without compromising the underlying principles of what they had developed.

As a Head of School Standards explained:

> *The difficulty is that schools that feel that they are very different do not think it (the partnership) will benefit them because they are in different circumstances. However, the actual principles of good practice can be transferred. It's a matter of thinking, 'Well, what does that look like in my classroom?' rather than thinking that it's going to be unrealistic.*

A similar feeling was expressed by a headteacher who said:

> *You have to get over the feeling of difference and think how things can be adapted to work here. For example, I went to see a programme in another area. We wouldn't be able to implement it here, but we could use some of it. It's good for us to recognise where we are the same as others and where we differ, what we can adapt to suit us and how we can adapt and accommodate other ideas.*

However, it must be noted that some of those interviewed were talking theoretically, as they themselves had only experienced partnerships with other schools with similar characteristics. A headteacher reported that *'We haven't come across any problems because the schools in the area are quite similar'*. An LEA adviser reiterated the point by explaining that sharing good practice between schools with different characteristics was possible, although in their experience schools had cooperated to address the needs of pupils with similar backgrounds.

8.3 Models for planning, supporting and developing partnership working

Interviewees were asked:

> *What, in your experience, are the best ways to plan for and support the development of effective school partnerships? Would you advocate any particular model or models of partnership working?*

Interviewees tended not to identify specific models: one headteacher rejected the idea,

saying *'It is how it needs to be at the time'*. They were, however, willing to offer their ideas about the characteristics of effective partnerships. LEAs recognised the need to work with schools and to avoid the temptation to impose ways of working. They had found that there was often a need for an incentive to attract schools to take part in a particular initiative and that *'real decisions involving real resources need to be delegated to partnerships to enable them to start working competently'*. One of the key features identified was the need to ensure that the stakeholders had a sense of ownership of the partnership. For example, one LEA officer felt that the partners themselves had to be willing participants given the nature of partnership working: *'partnerships are organic and therefore cannot be imposed'*. Several headteachers also stressed the importance of a 'bottom-up' approach; the partnership *'should be instigated, not imposed'* and everyone's views should be taken into account.[1]

Each partnership needed to have clear and realistic aims and objectives, clarity about the methodology which it intended using and about what structures would be in place: *'First of all, there's got to be a clear rationale for it. The fortunes of the partnership will depend upon the clarity of the rationale'*. This included ensuring that all partners understood the reasons why the initiative was being undertaken.

Several school-based respondents believed that LEAs had a key role to play in this process and in providing a source of vision and guidance for the schools involved. This point was recognised by a number of the LEAs who said that they were committed to supporting partnerships as a means of fulfilling their role in challenging and encouraging schools.

It was recognised that resistance to change was evident in some schools (see Section 7.2.1). It was sometimes difficult to convince individual members of staff of the benefits of what was being attempted. Some respondents felt that overcoming such attitudes was a challenge and that there was a need to foster a more experimental culture in which staff were not afraid of making mistakes. An LEA officer felt that one of the ways of doing so was to ensure that partnerships addressed the priorities of the participating schools as well as the national agenda. A headteacher stressed the importance of those for whom the partnership was designed to be involved from the beginning: *'It is stronger and there will be less resistance'*.

Factors such as trust, honesty and openness were perceived as crucial. Equality was also mentioned: *'The key is not to base the partnership on a strong school/weak school model'*.[2] On the contrary, it was important for each school to be realistic about its own strengths and weaknesses. Each school should be *'sensitive to the other school's status'* and should *'keep parity of esteem'*. In partnerships involving several schools, rotating the chairmanship at their regular meetings was seen as one visible manifestation of this approach.

The importance of detailed and careful planning of partnerships was highlighted by the majority of those who took part in this research. One LEA officer highlighted the importance of researching the needs of the client groups (schools, colleges and in some cases businesses) thoroughly before proceeding.

A number of respondents commented on the need for a robust planning process, saying that it should ensure that all partners were prepared to contribute fully to a partnership. For example, one advised anyone contemplating working in partnership to *'make sure you've done the politics first'* and obtained everyone's support. There should be an initial meeting, so that everyone involved would be clear about their expectations. The planning process should address a number of issues, including:

- providing opportunities to network with other agencies
- maintaining constant liaison

- nominating individuals as key contacts
- providing training opportunities
- providing an advice line
- ensuring a means of providing feedback, both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up'
- having clear milestones against which progress could be measured.

At the same time, respondents emphasised the need to ensure that the work of the partnership was embedded into participants' activities. According to one respondent, there was a need to develop 'systems and a management structure so that partnership is not an add-on but an integral part of the system'. The need to ensure adequate lead-in periods was also highlighted.

Providing partnerships and individual participating schools with adequate funding was an issue which was raised by a number of those interviewed. Moreover, they emphasised that the funding arrangements 'should be transparent' in order to ensure that all partners understood the basis for those decisions.

The need to develop capacity was also recognised by both school-based respondents and LEAs. For example, one LEA felt that it currently lacked the capacity to provide brokerage services to assist schools to participate in partnership working.

At school level, one essential feature was the need for senior managers to be committed to the partnership and its objectives, even though they might not be directly involved in leading it. Headteachers had to sell the idea to their schools: *'the leadership has to be totally committed and this is wider than just the headteacher'*.

There were suggestions that the key role in each partnership should be allocated to dedicated coordinators who should be 'enthusiasts' committed to taking the ideas forward. Several respondents felt that the presence of strong steering groups had also been beneficial. It was recognised that those who were responsible for leading an activity should be provided with sufficient time and resources to enable them to do so effectively and without placing them under additional stress: 'Somebody has got to take the lead, it does take time and effort'. For example, the need to give teachers enough non-teaching time to undertake duties associated with developing partnership working was an issue which was raised by a number of respondents:

> [Partnerships] *work best when there is a dedicated member of staff ... to organise, to share the workload.*

It was therefore necessary to *'make someone responsible, then support them'*. Staff needed time to talk to each other and share good practice. One headteacher said it was necessary to *'talk, communicate all the time'* and *'keep everybody informed'*.

The need for an inclusive style of leadership was also recognised. This involved including the broadest possible range of staff within each school or partner organisation. According to interviewees, for this to happen, there was a need for:

- effective communication which was appropriate to the different management styles used by each school or partner organisation
- a recognition that the ethos of individual partners could be different
- common training for participants
- regular meetings and feedback which did not become onerous
- the development of an ambience which encouraged participation and contributions from as wide a range of people as possible
- ensuring that individuals who worked at different levels within a school or partner organisation were involved and able to contribute
- ensuring the partnerships were not regarded as something which was imposed

- providing strong leadership whilst ensuring that certain individuals were not in dominant roles.

These points were emphasised forcefully by several interviewees. For example, one felt that there was a need to ensure that partnerships operated at three levels: that of the headteachers, the staff and the pupils.

The need for effective monitoring and evaluation was also highlighted in this research. This included reviewing progress at key milestones in a partnership's activities and judging them against firm criteria rather than 'gut reaction'. The need to ensure that effective means of communicating review outcomes were in place was also noted. For example, one respondent stated that a standing conference had proved an effective method of disseminating information. Above all, it was recognised that there was a need to be open about both success and failure and for participants to have the confidence to recognise mistakes and to learn from them.

Notes

[1] In a sense, some partnerships are imposed – see Section 4.4 on 'prescribed' partnerships. However, even in such cases it is possible to adopt a collegiate approach to developing the partnership.

[2] Some partnerships are in fact based on this kind of model, but can develop into a more equal partnership, with both 'strong' and 'weak' schools recognising that they can learn from their partner(s). See Section 4.4.

9 Conclusions and recommendations

In this chapter we summarise the findings from the research and the implications for the further development of school partnerships.

9.1 Summary of findings

In exploring school partnerships, there is an initial problem of definition: – what exactly is a partnership? There can be variation in:

- the number of schools involved – from two schools working together, to a large number of schools cooperating
- the origins of the partnership – were schools brought together by the LEA, or did they decide for themselves to work together?
- the nature and purpose of the partnership – are schools collaborating in order to qualify for additional (e.g. EiC) funding, or because one wishes to learn from another, or in order to achieve a common goal?

There can also be variation in the depth of the partnership. For example, it is common for secondary school staff to visit feeder primary schools to meet future pupils: should such an arrangement be classified as a partnership between the schools concerned? It is clearly of a very different order from the kind of partnership that involves working closely together on a whole range of issues. For the purpose of the research, we operated within a broad definition of partnership and generally accepted what LEAs and schools provided as examples, without questioning whether these qualified as 'genuine' partnerships or not. The research therefore encompassed the broad spectrum of school partnerships, as discussed below. However, the main focus was on *school* partnerships; many of the schools visited had strong and valuable links with FE/HE colleges, for example, but the aim of the project was to explore school-school partnerships and their role in sharing best practice.

The research team visited a total of 39 schools and one FE college in 12 LEAs. They talked to LEA officers and school staff about partnerships and the roles they played in them. A wide range of partnerships was identified, reflecting the varied characteristics outlined above. Many had formed in response to government initiatives, such as Beacon Schools, Specialist Schools, EAZs or EiC areas: others were based on local priorities, such as facilitating transition or sharing resources. Some were well-established, others recent developments; some had been established by LEAs, others by the schools involved. Schools could be variously grouped by:

- phase (e.g. a partnership based on collaboration between secondary heads)
- subject (e.g. a partnership formed to share ICT expertise and resources)
- location (e.g. a partnership comprising all the schools in a given area).

Within schools, the level of awareness relating to partnerships varied considerably. In some schools, it appeared that staff, and sometimes pupils, knew about the partnerships in which the school was involved; at the other extreme, awareness seemed to be limited to those directly involved in partnership activities. As a number of interviewees stressed, the commitment (though not necessarily the active involvement) of senior managers is vital if partnerships are to be successful. It was also suggested that a 'champion' (a non-SMT member of staff) could play an important role in representing and promoting a partnership within a school.

School partnerships are not new; indeed, some of those represented in the research were of several years' duration. However,

there was a feeling among some LEA interviewees that collaboration had increased, due partly to the introduction of government/national initiatives that had created frameworks for partnership working. In recent years, the emphasis had moved from competition to collaboration; some schools had welcomed the change, but in some cases there had been difficulty in making the adjustment and tensions still remained.

LEAs played a variety of roles in school partnerships. In some cases they had been involved in establishing the partnership, perhaps in connection with the process of bidding for government funds for a major initiative such as EiC. Some partnerships were facilitated by LEA officers, but in other cases the LEA kept its distance, allowing schools to have ownership and providing advice or support only as and when requested. In some cases funding was provided by or channelled through the LEA.

9.2 Constraints and benefits of partnership working

Entering into partnerships often led to changes in schools' working practices, in order to accommodate arrangements made with or by their partners. Such changes could sometimes require a great deal of effort by staff and lead to some disruption. Interviewees were asked to give their views on the relative benefits and difficulties associated with partnership working.

9.2.1 Inhibiting factors

Inevitably, interviewees identified factors that, in their view, inhibited partnership working. The constraints identified, which were both practical and cultural, could develop into major inhibitors of progress towards setting up or maintaining partnerships.

Practical constraints included funding, time restrictions, organisation and the additional demands of partnership working. Indeed, time restrictions were identified by the majority of interviewees as a major barrier to partnership working. Time is needed to set up, manage and organise partnership activities and for staff training and development. Schools, already under time pressures imposed by the curriculum, examination timetables and administration, were reluctant to inflict further pressure on staff and students. Whilst there were examples of partnership schools organising supply cover, parallel timetabling of lessons or concurrent non-contact time for key partnership staff, such arrangements were an additional expense for schools and were only feasible if adequate additional funding was available. Involvement in partnership meetings or activities was particularly difficult for primary staff, most of whom did not have any non-contact time.

Difficulties were expressed by partnerships that had received limited funding because this led to difficult decisions about which schools should receive additional resources. Some complained that they had not benefited or had received inadequate resourcing. The indications are that partnership working will require ongoing funding if it is to continue and flourish.

Cultural constraints may be more difficult to overcome in the short term, especially in areas that have fostered a climate of competitiveness in the recent past. Interviewees sometimes mentioned their fears in moving to more collaborative working, particularly if there were strong-minded advocates of competition in senior roles in local schools. Views differed about whether schools in different circumstances could learn from one another, with some interviewees expressing doubts about the wisdom of working collaboratively with schools that were unlike their own. Collaborating schools also need to be open to scrutiny and willing to give up some autonomy and this was viewed as an additional problem in some school communities. Even if staff embrace collaboration, it is sometimes difficult for

them to understand and view developments from the perspective of partner schools and, in such cases, flexibility and compromise may be difficult to achieve.

The doubts expressed indicate that changing the climate to one of collaboration rather than competition may require staff development and, perhaps, opportunities for key players to examine the benefits of partnership working through visits and conversations with advocates in other LEAs.

9.2.2 Benefits

Despite constraints, interviewees recognised the benefits of partnership working. These included improved transition, opportunities for staff training and professional development, sharing of good practice and additional funding and resources.

Some interviewees intimated that their current collaborations were wider and more meaningful than those entered into in the past. Partners were sharing resources and facilities, curriculum approaches and even policies, as part of these wider collaborations. Sharing practice and policies was of particular benefit to schools that had been in difficulties and were in need of fast and useful updates to improve their offer to students. Additional funding and resources sometimes provided one or more of the partner schools with improved and more up-to-date equipment that could be shared with others in the partnership, thus providing an upgraded community resource. For small rural schools in particular, partnerships provided a mechanism for pooling resources and organising joint enrichment activities that would not otherwise have been feasible. Partnerships were also able to develop teaching materials which could be used by all the schools involved, resulting in considerable saving of staff time.

Partnerships usually provided school staff with additional opportunities for training and professional development, often through jointly-organised courses that enabled teachers to exchange ideas and practices with colleagues. While such exchanges were valuable in terms of professional development, teachers were also enthused by opportunities to meet with others teaching the same subject and to hear about new ways of developing their specialism. Sometimes, if the teachers involved were the only ones teaching a subject in their school, such training and networking opportunities could overcome their feelings of isolation. Indeed, in addition to sharing approaches to the curriculum, teachers also expressed satisfaction with the support and confidence they had gained from such interactions.

Many of the partnerships investigated had received additional funding in order to launch their collaborative ventures. Staff welcomed the funding, as it had provided a number of benefits that helped launch their partnership, including non-contact time for key partners, additional resources and finance for staff training.

The main concern of schools involved in partnerships was, of course, to benefit pupils and to improve their performance. While many of the partnerships examined were fairly new and pupil outcomes not yet assessed, staff often expressed the view that, in time, the collaboration would benefit students. Some examples were given of improved test results occurring already, although many respondents felt that it was too early to claim a definite link between partnership working and raising attainment. However, there were reports of improved student motivation, attitudes and self-esteem, which were supported by comments made in interviews with groups of students who had participated in collaborative activities.

On the whole, those involved in partnership working regarded it as worthwhile, despite the additional burdens it imposed. They welcomed the more open relationship with other schools and the opportunities provided

to raise pupils' attainment. There was much goodwill and a willingness to continue; a hope was often expressed that funding would be available to develop and widen partnerships.

9.3 Features of successful partnership working

Interviewees offered their ideas about the characteristics of successful partnerships. For example, LEAs recognised the need to work with the schools, rather than imposing ways of working. LEA officers were aware that stakeholders needed a sense of ownership if they were to enter wholeheartedly into partnership working. This was endorsed by headteachers who stressed the importance of taking into account the views of all partners. Indeed, involving all likely participant schools from the outset could help to overcome the resistance to change that sometimes inhibited the growth of partnerships, by ensuring that the priorities of participating schools were addressed from the outset.

Partnerships need to have clear and realistic aims and objectives, as well as detailed and careful planning of the pathway to achieving them, if they are to be successfully established and sustained. A number of school staff believed that an element of the LEA's role in supporting partnerships could be to provide a source of vision and guidance in this planning. In addition, the planning process needs to ensure that all partners contribute fully to the partnership from the outset and that arrangements are in place to nominate key staff and to ensure they know whom to contact for liaison and advice.

Embedding the work of the partnership into the culture of the partner schools was viewed as an important contributor to maintaining collaboration. Providing training opportunities for key staff and a means of giving feedback to others at all levels in the partner organisations would help to ensure that systems were in place for maintaining the partnership.

Adequate funding and clear and agreed arrangements for distribution of funds were acknowledged as important and the need to develop capacity was recognised by both school and LEA staff. Partnerships also need the endorsement and commitment of senior managers, although the latter do not need to be directly involved in leading them, as this task could be allocated to a dedicated coordinator. This might be a staff member who is enthusiastic and committed to taking the ideas forward. However, this role would require adequate non-teaching time to be provided to enable the coordinator to carry out the work effectively, as well as support from senior managers.

An inclusive and strong style of leadership was considered necessary for successful partnerships, in order to accommodate the ethos and different management styles of partner schools and other organisations. This required effective communication that was appropriate to individual partners, including regular well-managed meetings, common training for participants and the development of a culture that encouraged contributions from a wide range of people. It is also necessary to ensure that individuals at all levels in the partner organisations are able to become involved and to feel they contribute to the partnership, rather than it being imposed.

Effective monitoring and evaluation was highlighted as a necessary contributor to the success of partnerships. Key milestones are needed, against which partners could review progress and there was also recognition of the need for a clear means of communicating the outcomes. Most importantly, it was considered essential for partners to recognise both success and failure and to have the confidence to learn from mistakes and to celebrate achievements.

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