Evaluating collaborative effectiveness in schools: A working paper

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Dr Gavin Duffy (2014) ©
School of Education
Queen's University Belfast

Rationale

Given the relatively emergent practice of shared education and more broadly collaboration between schools of different sectors, it is important to contextualise and evaluate this activity with the aim of identifying the educational, social and economic benefits of collaboration. Alongside this, an education system divided along denominational lines has meant that schools have been separated by longstanding cultural and institutional barriers making the practice and context of cross-sectoral collaboration all the more important to study. Arguably, given our divided society context, research has produced a corpus of literature which for the most part demonstrates the social impact of shared education, namely how the practice can improve relations. While there is an international literature corpus (mostly hailing from the England and North America) which explores the relationship between school improvement and collaboration, there remains a paucity of such explicit research in Northern Ireland.

In the first instance this document presents a graphical model which describes the variety and depth of collaborative activity between schools that currently exists. Next the document presents a brief overview of collaborative effectiveness literature and proposes a type of model and methodological approach which could be used to evaluate collaboration between schools.

Context

Shared education has become a widely used term in Northern Ireland particularly by educationalists, policymakers and the media. More recently shared education has received significant support from Government and there have been a series of actions and commitments which demonstrate that shared education is evolving from a programmatic initiative to systemic practice. These include: commitments in the 2011-2015 Programme for Government[1] which included the setting up of a ministerial advisory group on shared education[2]. An inquiry into Integrated and Shared Education was launched by the NI

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[1] http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/about-the-department/strategic-planning/programme-for-government.htm
[2] http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofEducation/MinisterialAdvisoryGroup/

Assembly Committee for Education[3]. Recent policy initiatives support and promote the practice of schools sharing, such as the Together Building a United Community initiative[4] in which there are commitments to build shared education campuses across Northern Ireland[5] and enhance the quality and extent of shared education. Most recently cross departmental funding was announced to support a systemic shared education programme across Northern Ireland.[6]

While the Ministerial Advisory Group on Shared Education clearly defines it as:

> Shared education involves two or more schools or other educational institutions from different sectors working in collaboration with the aim of delivering educational benefits to learners, promoting the efficient and effective use of resources, and promoting equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion. (Connolly et al. 2013: xiii)

shared education remains broadly defined and is often used to describe a range of activities; from initiatives which offer limited and unsustainable contact opportunities between pupils from different backgrounds to initiatives which see schools engaged in regular and sustained collaborative activity, usually where pupils learn together and including practice whereby teachers and senior leaders are involved in professional networks, share expertise and resources.

Illustrating the diversity of collaboration in Northern Ireland

The continuum model below, first presented by the authors at the Shared Education Learning Forum Conference in 2012[7] proposes a graphical typology of shared or collaborative models of education ranging from schools operating in isolation of one another to a model of collaborative education whereby schools become so institutionally close that a type of interdependency emerges. The continuum categories are described below. It is important to note that the category described at the right end of the continuum is best thought of as aspirational at this point; there are currently no cross-sectoral partnerships in Northern Ireland that can be entirely described as institutionally interdependent. However, given the DENI announcement in June 2014 regarding shared

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[3] http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Official-Report/Committee-Minutes-of-Evidence/Session-2013-2014/July-2014/Inquiry-into-Integrated-and-Shared-Education-Department-of-Education-Briefing/
[4] http://www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/together-building-a-united-community
[5] http://www.deni.gov.uk/shared-education-campuses-programme
[6] http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news-ofmdfm-170914-robinson-and-mcguinness
[7] http://www.schoolsworkingtogether.co.uk/documents/Sharing%20Education%20Conference%20Programme%20Dec%202012.pdf

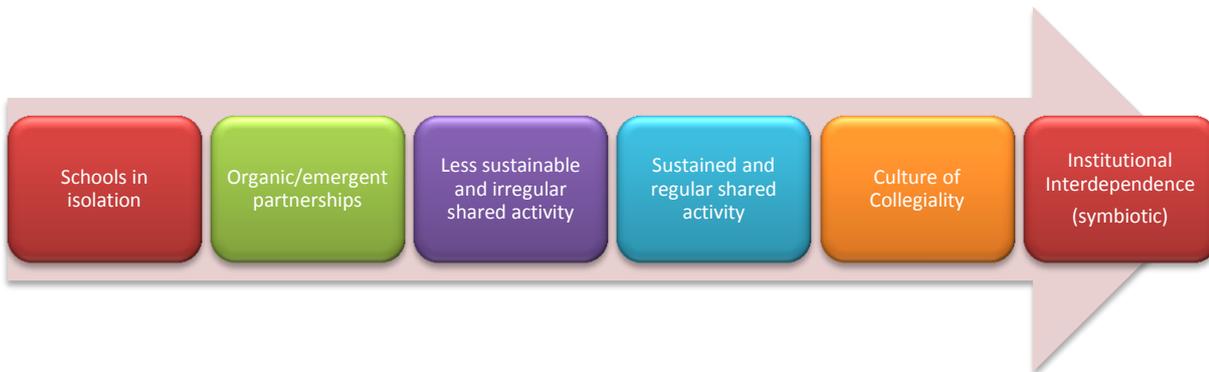campuses the idea of interdependent cross-sectoral arrangements could be realised given the right conditions.

Figure 1: Collaboration Continuum: Duffy, Gallagher, Stewart & Baker, 2012

Continuum descriptors

Schools in isolation

Schools which are in isolation of one another, where there is little to no collaboration with other schools.

Organic and Emergent

Organic and emergent partnerships are those where collaborative activity first begins. This may be characterised by limited and ad hoc contact between schools. A distinction may be made between organic and emergent partnerships whereby the former is partnership activity motivated by the schools themselves as opposed to partnership activity which is motivated or enacted by an external agency.

Less sustainable and irregular shared activity

Characterised by more frequent contact between schools, activity may be defined by limited teacher and leader contact. Elements of shared learning between pupils may occur. Activity between schools is likely to be programmatic, with defined and short periods of contact such as joint school trips, visiting partner schools of short learning programmes. Collaborative activity is limited in terms of sustainability.

Sustained and regular activity

Collaboration between schools is increasingly regular and well-co-ordinated. Collaborative activity involving staff and pupils occurs over a sustained period of time. Shared learning between pupils is regular, timetabled and embedded within the curriculum. Senior staff begin to form partnership infrastructure.

<u>Culture of collegiality</u>

Schools have been involved in sustained collaborative activities and are developing strong institutional relationships characterised by high status curricular shared learning between pupils and increased collaborative activities between teachers and leaders. Management and co-ordination of collaboration is distributed across staff. A strong partnership infrastructure is evident and the practice of collaboration begins to normalise. Collegial relations embed. Teachers and leaders have more frequent contact and generate shared resources. New knowledge and shared resources are created.

<u>Institutional interdependence</u>

Schools develop a kind of organisational symbiosis in that collaboration has normalised, is based on common need, involves significant shared learning and where staff, leaders and Governors recognise the value of collaboration. Schools have reached a point where they pool resources in terms of expertise, finances, teachers, and facilities. While schools remain distinct and maintain their separate identities they enter into an interdependent relationship. Collaboration becomes a vehicle to deliver education more effectively.

Effective collaboration

The continuum when first presented was intended to describe the diversity and importantly the depth of collaborative initiatives which currently exist in Northern Ireland. However the model implies the potential to evolve from unsustainable models of partnership towards more effective models of collaboration which are sustainable and focused on core school activity as opposed to characterised by contact initiatives which are often located on the periphery of school activity. What is required from here is a set of criteria or guidance around collaborative practice which is indicative of effectiveness. A review of international literature which examines effective school partnerships has identified common characteristics.

Key texts including Atkinson et al. (2007); Head (2003); Higham and Yeomans (2009); Hodgson and Spours (2006) but in particular, Woods et al. (2006); Katz et al. (2008); Katz et al. (2009) and Katz and Earl, (2010) identify similar typological models of collaborative effectiveness. For example Woods et al. (2006, 59), proposed seven effectiveness measures including: the degree to which collaborative partnerships have strategic vision; group/area identity; have organisational infrastructure; the extent/quality of professional collaborative activity; activities which penetrate below senior management; where partnerships innovate to seek significant transformation; and where there is evidence of collaboration having become normalised. Katz et al. (2008; 2009 & 2010) have developed a networked learning

theory of action which extracted out common effectiveness themes from the existing literature. They propose six key features which enable successful networked learning communities (Katz and Earl, 2010): whether the learning network has an agreed *purpose and focus*; understanding more about the *relationships* which connect individuals/institutions and provide social capital; the type and extent of collaboration; creating opportunities for collaborative *enquiry* and professional reflection; examining how leadership supports collaboration; the types of *support and capacity building* for individual and collective learning to take place. Also important is examining partnerships in order to understand the extent to which new knowledge and resources are created (Katz et al. 2008; Hargreaves, 2003) as a consequence of collaboration. Wenger's communities of practice (1998) is also useful in this context in regards to discussions about the formation of communities, through joint enterprise, mutual engagement and the formation of a shared repertoire of resources.

The model presented below identifies and summarises a variety of effectiveness indicators found in the literature:

Figure 2: A typology of collaborative effectiveness indicators

Studies by Duffy and Gallagher (2014a 2014b) used most of these characteristics in two separate studies to contextualise and evaluate various school partnerships. One study sought to ascertain if partnerships in the first phase of SEP 1 were sustainable post funding, while another study contextualised and evaluated a partnership that was involved in the Interface/Contested Space Programme (OFMDFM/AP). These criteria are currently being applied to the same partnership which has been involved in a three year qualitative study. (Duffy and Gallagher, 2011-2014).The effectiveness characteristics have been used in the design of research instruments, namely semi-structured interviews or focus group themes and as a type of lens during ethnographic observations.

This paper proposes that the continuum model coupled with the effectiveness criteria could be used in three ways:

1. As a model of collaboration which is empirically tested in a selection of partnerships to confirm reliability. (see suggested methodology below)
2. As an evaluation model which can be used to plot the location of a partnership and its relative advancement along the continuum, with the ultimate aim of assessing effectiveness and potential sustainability
3. A developmental model where the effectiveness indicators are used as a roadmap to advance schools along the continuum

The matrix presented below (Table 1) combines three elements: the types of collaborative activities that schools are likely to engage in; indicators of effectiveness and the continuum descriptors.

Collaborative Effectiveness Matrix

Collaborative activity	Indicators of effectiveness	Continuum descriptors
No contact		**Schools in isolation**
Conversations between staff	**Low level, confined to communication**	**Organic/Emergent Partnerships**
Occasional face to face meetings (staff)		
Ad hoc or very infrequent activity		
Staff coordination or communication on non-core activity	**Emergent coordination**	
Agreements to undertake collaborative programme activities	**Emergent collaboration confined to programme remit**	**Less sustainable and irregular shared activity**
Limited contact between pupils (usually non-curricular)		
Teachers planning together (specific to programme activity)		
Sharing space	**Emergence of partnership infrastructure**	
Regular leader meetings		**Regular and sustained shared activity**
Regular shared learning between pupils (curricular)	**Quality and extent of collaborative activity improves**	
Curricular planning between staff		
Teachers training together	**Relationships blossom**	
Creating shared resources	**Generating shared resources and new knowledge**	
Shared policies		
Governor Recognition	**Institutional support and recognition**	**Culture of collegiality**
Governor Involvement		
Collective icons, insignia, materials emerge e.g. shared choir, shared sports team, shared logos	**Established collective identity**	
Various departments collaborate	**Collaborative transfer occurs collaboration becomes unbound**	
Collaborative approaches to learning and assessment (across year groups)	**Higher quality of collaborative activity**	**Institutional Interdependency**
Sharing teachers	**Innovation**	
Memos of understanding and other more formalised arrangements		
Joint capital projects	**Sharing resources at an institutional level: pooling budgets, joint capital projects, innovation, stronger collective identity**	
Joint budgets		

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