Inspiring leaders to improve children’s lives

Research Associate Report
Dr Alan Lee, Executive Principal, Federation of Bedford Catholic Schools

Resource
The boundary spanners: leading in the collaborative context
Summer 2012
Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................... 3
Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 4
Literature review .............................................................................................................. 5
Methodology .................................................................................................................... 8
Findings ............................................................................................................................ 9
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 23
Recommendations .......................................................................................................... 25
Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................... 26
References ...................................................................................................................... 27

Disclaimer

In publishing Research Associate reports, the National College is offering a voice to practitioner leaders to communicate with their colleagues. Individual reports reflect personal views based on evidence-based research and as such are not statements of the National College’s policy.
Abstract

This research explores the nature of leadership within collaborative arrangements in education, defined in this context as a partnership involving more than a single institution. More specifically, it addresses three fundamental questions central to the success of leading in the collaborative context:

1. What are the main challenges?
2. Which personal characteristics and professional competences are key?
3. How can leaders best develop those personal characteristics and professional competences deemed most appropriate?

The report concludes that there can be significant challenges in and considerable obstacles to successfully leading collaborative enterprises. However, the potential benefits are also considerable and these support the belief in collaborative working within the profession.

This research indicates that effective leadership is essential for successful collaboration. However, the nature of collaborative endeavour presents specific leadership challenges. It therefore adds to the expanding field of literature in addressing these challenges, and moves beyond a focus on conventional forms of organisational structures, which are mostly hierarchical.

A key message of this research for policymakers is that future system leaders will possess innate behaviours and additional abilities developed through a record of success in a range of different situations. The further development of these abilities will require leadership programmes that begin with the leader and are tailored to their needs and the collaborative context in which they operate. They will need to be flexible, individualised and negotiable, with self-reflection and expert challenge at their heart. Teams of experienced mentors, sophisticated professional global networks and first-class practitioner research are the foundations on which to build.
**Introduction**

Individuals who exhibit the necessary combination of skills and attributes for collaboration are frequently termed boundary-spanners.

*Alter & Hage, 1993:17*

In an era of diminishing centralisation, collaboration is emerging as the dominant way of working in education. This report defines a collaborative as a partnership involving more than a single institution. Advocates of this movement point to an increasing number of independent evaluations of a range of collaborative programmes attesting to their positive value, from Excellence in Cities in 1999 (Hill, 2004) to the work of national leaders of education (NLEs) more recently (Matthews and Hill, 2010).

Theorists such as Hargreaves (2010; 2011) and Harris (2009) support this developing research. Hargreaves (2010:3) argues that the first building block of a self-improving education system is ‘clusters of schools’. The coalition government is convinced. It has introduced numerous measures to encourage and support collaborative practices. Such measures include, for instance, the intention to ‘dramatically extend the Academies programme’ (HM Government, 2010:12), the development of ‘a national network of Teaching Schools’ (ibid:9), and significant expansion in the number of national leaders of education (NLEs) and local leaders of education (LLEs).

This move has created exciting opportunities to consider different configurations of leadership across professional boundaries. However, Morrison (2011), in her paper, ‘Collaborative inter-professional practice: in search of evidence’, raises a number of concerns with regard to the leadership and working of collaborative initiatives:

> Collaborative leadership is open to almost any kind of definition ... terms are used interchangeably... there are few inter-professional studies.

*Morrison, 2011:13*

Clearly, for Morrison (2011), this is an area in need of urgent research-informed theoretical development. As an executive principal of a hard federation of four schools, an NLE and the leader of a teaching school, I agree. At present, the main sources of insight and advice are contained within the business literature (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Lank, 2006; Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002) and a limited number of College-commissioned studies (Hill, 2010; Matthews & Hill, 2010).

This report attempts to add to this developing body of work. Employing a wide definition of a collaborative as a partnership involving more than a single institution, the report addresses three fundamental questions central to the successful leadership of a collaborative:

1. What are the main challenges?
2. Which personal characteristics and professional competences are key?
3. How can leaders best develop those personal characteristics and professional competences deemed most appropriate?

The answers to these questions serve a number of purposes. Firstly, they provide leaders of single institutions aspiring to collaborative leadership across more than one institution with information on the challenges involved, the personal characteristics and professional competences needed and how the careers of others have progressed to system leadership. Second, those already employed as system leaders can use its findings and conclusions to consider how it chimes with their own experience and aid professional reflection. Third, those devising professional development programmes and resources can use the research to inform these. Finally, policymakers can view how system leaders have progressed to their positions and devise methods to facilitate this process in the future.
Literature review

This review seeks to explore the literature on leading in the collaborative context. More specifically, it investigates three related questions. First, why is collaboration emerging as the dominant way of working in the 21st century? Second, what are the practical challenges in establishing and leading a collaborative enterprise? Finally, is it possible to identify a list of behaviours or competences for the successful leadership of collaborative initiatives?

Why is collaboration emerging as the dominant way of working in the 21st century?

Numerous writers believe that collaboration is emerging as the dominant way of working in the 21st century. Lank (2006:1), for instance, suggests that collaboration is ‘the norm’, while Sullivan and Skelcher (2002:7) regard collaborative working as ‘commonplace’.

The drivers of collaborative working are complex. They are rooted in a belief that the challenges facing communities and countries are sufficiently sophisticated in scope and scale to require the involvement of a range of actors with complementary perspectives, expertise and experiences.

At the heart of the discussion are the twin issues of capacity and resources. Since the 1980s a common response to the challenge of insufficient capacity has been to involve a number of different partners and sectors in service provision (Clarke, 2000; Savas, 2000). This has been facilitated by rapid improvements in information and communication technology which has dramatically lowered the transaction costs of collaborating.

In education, many commentators present collaborative working as a way to redesign or transform and improve practice. Hargreaves (2007:17), for example, defines collaboration in terms of ‘the principle at the heart of system redesign’. Jackson and Timperley (2007) argue that it is becoming increasingly clear that collaborative working leads to improved performance and outcomes. Harris (2009:59) goes further, concluding that there is a ‘wealth of evidence’ connecting collaboration to a range of improved educational outcomes.

In England, collaboration continues to be central to the government’s transforming education agenda. The ever-increasing pressure on schools to establish partnerships with other schools, agencies and professionals is reaffirmed in the 2010 white paper, The Importance of Teaching, which states that:

Our direction of travel is towards schools as autonomous institutions collaborating with each other.

HM Government, 2010:12

Further, the white paper contains numerous measures designed to facilitate collaborative working. Such measures include the intention to ‘dramatically extend the Academies programme’ (HM Government, 2010:12), develop ‘a national network of Teaching Schools’ (HM Government, 2010:9) and significantly expand the number of national and local leaders of education.

What are the practical challenges in establishing and leading collaborative enterprise?

Collaborative activity is often equated with good or positive change. However, there is much literature on the practical challenges of establishing and leading collaborative enterprise (Harris, 2009; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Williamson, 2001).

There can be considerable political, operational and financial obstacles to making a collaboration work. Complaints relate to the level of resources that need to be invested to support collaborative endeavours, the slow progress towards goals, the lack of inclusiveness, and domination by some partners (Barnes, Sullivan & Matka, 2001; Davoudi & Healey, 1995; Williamson, 2001).
Harris (2009) suggests that the collaborative process is likely to involve disagreement and contest. She introduces three types of collaboration that are likely to be counterproductive: contrived, cosy and colluding networks. Contrived networks are formed simply for extra resources and they subsequently dissipate and disband when these diminish. Cosy networks are based on friendship groups or existing partnerships that manifest the tell-tale signs of inertia because powerful personal relationships dictate and restrict their activity. Colluding networks work together to disguise the fact that very little is happening.

Similarly, Huxham and Vangen (2005) introduce the notions of collaborative inertia and collaborative thuggery to describe dysfunctional collaborative working. The former refers to situations where the outcomes from collaborative activity are negligible or non-existent, whilst the latter describes situations where manipulation and political activity replace shared decision-making.

Each collaborative is set in its own local context and as such will be subject to specific influences. Barnes, Sullivan and Matka (2001) emphasise this point, talking in terms of the locality effect. Factors such as the history of the collaboration, the prevailing political culture, the quality of relationships and established organisational boundaries will all contribute to the success or otherwise of the collaborative venture. Moreover, collaborations do not exist in isolation from the wider system. Their effectiveness therefore is not a matter of internal development alone but also a matter of how they connect with other communities. Effective interconnections are likely to enhance performance, whilst isolation will tend to reduce it.

**Is it possible to identify a list of behaviours and competences for the successful leadership of collaborative initiatives?**

The literature is unanimous in stating that effective leadership is essential for successful collaboration (Harris, 2009; Lank, 2006; Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002). Indeed, Lafasto and Larson (2001) state that:

> Partnerships [collaboratives] without formal leadership are consistently poor at managing their own performance.

Lafasto & Larson, 2001:140

A number of writers go further and argue that leading in a collaborative context challenges traditional approaches to leadership (Huxham & Vangen, 2005) and that:

> Collaborative working requires a particular set of personal and professional competencies.

Lank, 2006:163

Hargreaves (2010) agrees in the context of school-to-school support, concluding that:

> Knowing how to lead a high-performing school is a necessary but not always sufficient condition of knowing how to help another school to succeed.

Hargreaves, 2010:15

He claims that LLEs and NLEs are successful because they possess additional competences.

In the corporate world, a range of similar notions exists; partnership competences or alliance capabilities are introduced, for instance, and these are fairly well researched. (Alter & Hage, 1993; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Lank, 2006). Hargreaves (2010:15) summarises such research into offering three core features of partnership competences: co-ordination, communication and bonding. Co-ordination relates to the need to build consensus, communication to the requirement to be open and honest, and bonding to the creation of trust.

However, this summary underplays the role of context relative to the position of other authors. Understanding the operational context is a key competence identified by many researchers in this area (Alter & Hage, 1993; Lank, 2006; Harris, 2009).
With regard to the education field, research is relatively developmental. Nonetheless, theoretical conceptualisations are beginning to emerge (Hargreaves, 2010; Fullan, 2003) and much National College-commissioned research has been produced (Hill, 2004; Matthews & Hill, 2010; National College, 2010; Rudd et al, 2011). Hargreaves (2010), for example, builds on the three core features mentioned above and stresses the importance of the school as a learning community, the need to distribute leadership throughout the organisations and the notion that working with another school must be seen as a reciprocal process.

The work of Robert Hill (Hill, 2004; Hill 2010; Matthews & Hill, 2010) is seminal to gaining a deeper understanding of the necessary competences required to lead across organisational boundaries. Woods (2011) also references the work of Matthews and Hill (2010) and argues that there are eight essential personal characteristics of NLEs:

- moral purpose
- generosity of spirit
- personal humility with intense professional will
- contagious enthusiasm
- determination and resilience
- persistence
- hope
- optimism

Hill’s (2004) research into networked learning communities (NLCs) and the roles of network leaders therein is also particularly insightful. He identified five core activities or competences: communication, knowledge management, changing relations, building capacity and planning for sustainability (Hill, 2004:2).

Certainly, whilst the labels may be different, be they essential personal characteristics or core competences, there are remarkable similarities in the types of behaviour identified. The notion of a leader of collaborations, a boundary spanner, who is a skilled communicator and highly knowledgeable and who can build trust and capacity, whilst simultaneously planning for sustainability is presented. Exploration of such behaviours and competences is the purpose of this piece of practitioner research.
Methodology

The aim of this research was to gain an insight into leading collaboratives, from those who currently do just that. In particular, the aim was to gain answers to three related questions: what are the main challenges, what are the key personal characteristics and professional competences and how have these leaders developed them?

To answer these questions, the research adopted a qualitative methodology, interviewing 12 very experienced and successful leaders of collaboratives. All the members of the sample had experience of headship and all led institutions where leadership and management had been judged either ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted. The sample included four NLEs, two LLEs, two executive principals, two local authority heads of school improvement and a director of education.

The questions were structured into the three focus areas. Within each area, interviewees were asked to reflect on their professional experiences and outline some of the challenges they had faced and the personal characteristics and professional competences they had employed to overcome the challenges. Further, interviewees were asked to consider their practice and how this had developed. In doing so, particular interest was taken in how leadership – as an activity – may differ in the absence of formal line-management power and consequent devolved final decision-making authority. This approach facilitated a detailed level of response and attempted not to limit the interviewees to any preconceived ideas possessed by the researcher.

All the interviews took place during the summer term 2011. To give the interviewees time to consider their responses, an initial discussion took place before the interviews to explain their purpose. The questions were also sent five days before the interview to allow for thinking time. All respondents prepared for the interview, many referring to crib sheets throughout. In addition, an unseen interpretation of the views of Hargreaves (2010), Matthews and Hill (2010) and Hill (2004) was presented and the interviewees were asked to rank the views in order of significance. This explored if, and to what extent, practitioner perceptions correspond with those of a theorist and earlier research. These findings are presented in tabular format below.

The findings present the views of those who lead collaboratives: a partnership involving more than a single institution. Hence, interviewees drew on their experiences from a range of ways of working over a number of years.

A possible limitation of the findings is a lack of triangulation. However, the focus throughout is on presenting the leadership views of those who lead. Consequently, responses were recorded as they were told. These were placed in a framework developed from existing theory and practitioner research and an interpretation of this is provided. In line with discourse analysis theory, the questions and data-capture forms are available on request.
Findings

The literature on collaborative working predicts its dominance, enthuses its advantages and urges its necessity. However, research and theory on the leadership of collaboratives in education remain limited and emergent. Beyond education, the evidence we have both identifies many practical challenges (Hargreaves & Fink, 2005; Huxham & Vangen, 2005) and presents examples of ineffective practice (Harris, 2009; Lank, 2006). Most recently, a number of thinkpieces and practitioner reports for school leaders to consider have been made available (Hargreaves, 2010; Matthews & Hill, 2010; National College, 2010).

Overcoming the challenges

Early research (Williamson, 2001; Barnes, Sullivan & Matka, 2001; Davoudi & Healy, 1995) suggests that there can be considerable political, operational and financial challenges to making a collaboration work. The findings of this research confirm this.

All interviewees identified both political and operational challenges, whilst 6 of the 12 spoke of issues of resources. Locality factors (see Barnes, Sullivan & Matka, 2001) such as history and environment were among the other stated factors.

Political challenges centred on leadership. There was a clear consensus that for a collaboration to be effective there must be clear leadership. Many expressed the need for a formally appointed leader with integrity, credibility and authority. To be effective, the leader must have, it was viewed, moral purpose, a proven track record of achievement and intellectual nimbleness. Two of the interviewees went further, suggesting that the leader may have to be prepared to sacrifice his or her home school in the short run for the benefit of the collaborative in the long term. Indeed, the tensions surrounding self-interest versus altruism, to which this report returns, repeatedly emerge throughout the interviews.

Proffered issues associated with ineffective leadership delivering ineffective collaborative working included domination by charismatic leaders, pursuing individual agendas – termed ‘collaborative thuggery’ by Huxham and Vangen (2005), cosy relationships between a few dominant personalities and the absence of leadership distribution or buy-in. One interviewee stated:

“For a collaboration to be successful, the leader or leaders must have real moral purpose. Leadership must be values-driven. All in the system must work for the good of the system. It is not about ‘I’, it is ‘we’.”

Leader 12

Agreeing with the cautions of Lafasto and Larson (2001:120) who warn that ‘team members know when they are being asked to serve the team leader’s ego, rather than the team’s goal’, one interviewee stated that:

“The driver of the collaborative must put ego on the backseat and have focused goals as the destination.”

Leader 8

Similarly, interviewees noted that members of collaboratives are very sensitive to empire-building, rather than positive collaborative working. Moreover, any actions taken by individuals which appeared to widen the sphere of influence of their home organisations were, interviewees deemed, frowned on by the organisation’s members.
However, with regard to the work of national support schools (NSSs) and NLEs, these were seen as a very particular type of collaboration. Because at the outset of this work a formal written contract was established, with very clear roles, intended outcomes and exit strategies, this introduced clarity and reduced potential conflict.

Both the LLEs and NLEs interviewed stressed the importance of the professional relationship between themselves and the headteachers they were supporting. LLEs and NLEs talked of showing empathy with challenges faced, identifying and celebrating progress made and nurturing together a joint responsibility model. As one leader pointed out:

“The key to success is the promotion of a ‘we’re in it together’ approach and the avoidance of a done-to model which produces short-term compliance and unsustainable impact – once the supporting school moves on, the cycle of underperformance returns.”

Leader 10

For some, successful collaborations necessitated the need for an honest-broker function, which could negotiate on the behalf of different members. Others introduced the notion of the wisdom of the system and the need for someone to own this, to be able to understand the constraints and opportunities provided by different organisational contexts and how these might affect individual behaviour.

Particularly in the early stages of collaborative working, there was seen to be a need to share accurate and validated information about different organisations and face what Collins (2001:17) terms the ‘brutal facts’. Interviewees believed that this necessitated an impartial, centralised body tasked with the collation, analysis and dissemination of data. Similarly, collaborative working would be facilitated by professionals who held the knowledge of where the experience and expertise existed, where need was located and possessed the skills to marry the two. Interviewees in the evaluation of City Challenge leadership strategies report reinforced this, and stressed the importance of finance:

Interviewees celebrated the pool of expertise in school-to-school support that was now readily available across all three areas [ie, London, the Black Country and Greater Manchester]. However, they questioned the extent to which this could be sustained without both a dedicated centralised team to manage and deploy support and also the funding necessary to release staff to support others.

Rudd et al, 2011:vi

All interviewees referred to a range of operational issues, such as clarity of objective, role responsibility and accountability procedures that hindered collaborative working. As one interviewee expressed it:

“Fuzzy thinking around the who, what, why, how, when questions invariably leads to little being achieved.”

Leader 4

Many views focused on the areas of clarity of objective, accountability and time. Interviewees spoke of a lack of shared vision, failure to relate to core purpose and members of the collaborative being unsure of their role. One leader succinctly summed it up:

“The collaborative’s goal is the collaborative’s reason for existence – it should be clear, owned and inspiring.”

Leader 6

A number of interviewees developed this point, supporting the vision for collaboration contained in the 2010 white paper of focused support by a national network of teaching schools, delivered by experts in the field: NLEs and LLEs.
All interviewees spoke of collaboratives in which they had been involved which suffered from a general lack of accountability. They felt that it was too easy for the collaborative to be nonchalant, develop easy relationships and stagnate. One respondent described such a situation in terms of a dysfunctional marriage:

“A bit like a marriage, collaborations can often accept and ignore when things are not right, rather than sort them out. Most often this leads to divorce.”

Leader 1

A number of respondents mentioned the issue of time. For them, vision and clarity depended on trust and confidence, and these required time to develop. However, time devoted to the collaborative was time away from school that involved the leaders asking some very difficult opportunity-cost questions of themselves. All interviewees were clear that such tensions should be reconciled through reference to the home school. One leader expressed it thus:

“My school pays my wages and expects me to deliver; that’s what I try my best to do. When working with others, I keep thinking ‘How will this impact positively on my school?’”

Leader 9

Exactly half the interviewees spoke of the resource implications of involvement in collaborative working. They employed very direct language, examples of which include: ‘what’s in it for me?’, ‘not my first priority’ and ‘you are always going to protect your own ship first’. One interviewee, an executive principal and NLE unequivocally stated:

“Without additional external resources, standards in the home school will fall, full stop.”

Leader 6

The clear message from these leaders was, ‘Yes we see the moral purpose in system leadership, but not at the expense of our own schools’. Nonetheless, 4 of the interviewees – 25 per cent – mentioned potential indirect positive effects for the home school of working in partnership within other schools. These were seen as important, but it was difficult to assess and disentangle their impact. For one leader:

“Having staff from my school support ‘school A’ has been challenging, but it has also been very beneficial. Staff have enjoyed sharing their expertise, which has enabled them to reflect on their practice and deepen their understanding. They have also brought ideas back with them to our school.”

Leader 1

Other factors identified as challenges largely corresponded to issues of locality. These included the history of relationships between leaders, the nature of competition in the area and relationships with the local authority. Some spoke of suspicion and jealousy between leaders, perhaps due to one school gaining a grant and another not. Others said that some schools compete for falling numbers and that this may cause them to erect barriers to collaboration. Others spoke of preferential treatment by local authorities towards some schools.

Two of the interviewees described behaviour within collaboratives as ‘gaming’ (see Lumby & Morrison, 2006). They suggested that there was often an inherent conflict between members of a collaborative, for example there was only so much finance to share or members were in competition for the same students. This could lead to individuals saying one thing in meetings and acting in other ways outside them. Another interviewee summed the situation up in terms of most collaborations being accidental, instigated by either geography or finance. For her:

“The most successful collaborations are those who self-select and share a common purpose.”

Leader 11
Despite the stated challenges to collaborative working, all respondents supported Lank’s view that:

Succeeding as a single organisational entity is increasingly dependent on succeeding as a participant in different collaborative processes.

Lank, 2006:3

Interviewees described collaborative working as commonplace and necessary, and were quick to champion its advantages and potential. As one respondent concluded:

“In the 21st century, to be successful is to collaborate. Schools do not operate in a vacuum. We are supported by a plethora of other professionals and agencies for the best interests of children.”

Leader 8

Furthermore, the interviewees understood that working with other organisations takes great skill. Consequently, they had worked hard to develop strategies and had spent time reflecting on the types of personal characteristics and professional competences required for such leadership. For most, reflection was facilitated by peer-to-peer discussion. Some referred to the importance of mentors for support and critical friendship. It seemed clear that most interviewees required a range of people on whom they could call depending on the need or issues in question. One interviewee praised the National College’s Fellowship Programme and the opportunities provided by it to reflect and have thinking challenged by expert mentors.

These findings amplify those of Rudd et al (2011) and Earley et al (2011). In their research on successful leadership strategies employed in City Challenge schools, Rudd et al (2011:iv) identified ‘the use of mentoring and coaching’ as a key for success. Similarly, Earley et al (2011:7), exploring the experiences of new headteachers described ‘high-quality mentoring’ as ‘crucial’ during early headship. The interviewees in this study, whilst being experienced and successful, continued to attach importance to and highly value mentoring, as they took on new challenges associated with system leadership.

Interviewees were blunt in describing the strategies they employed. They talked of, for instance, the need to be ‘Machiavellian’ and, of the ‘dark art’ of leading collaboratives, strategies that are observed in the work of Morrison (2011:13).

With regard to the challenge of leadership, the interviewees explained the importance of possessing an unwavering focus on individual goals. They were prepared to give ground on the smaller issues and maybe allow others to feel they were gaining, only to argue forcefully for the issues that really mattered to them. Patience was very important. Interviewees presented strategies that involved waiting until there was a vacuum or impasse before making a move. In doing so, the strategy was to include the thoughts of others to gain support.

When pressed as to whether the adoption of such strategies was to achieve individual goals rather than the common aims of the collaborative, interviewees stressed the importance of attempting to ensure that the latter serves the former. In cases where this was not so, the impact on the home school was paramount in the thinking of the leaders interviewed. Opportunity cost and potential benefits mattered. Nonetheless, all the leaders could provide examples of instances in which their actions had been purely altruistic, including providing copies of school policies and procedures as templates, supporting neighbouring schools to complete documentation (often the self-evaluation form or SEF) and significantly subsidising or offering free use of facilities.

Where operational issues hinder progress of the collaborative, the interviewees stated the need to be direct from the outset, even if it meant being unpopular. One interviewee commented:

“Given the choice, unpopular or unsuccessful, I’ll take the former every time.”

Leader 4
The same interviewee continued:

“I am a process man. Before I can think content, I have to know what the endgame is. What is the destination and when will we arrive?”

Leader 4

Responses to the need for additional resources were evenly divided. Some suggested that the outcomes of the collaborative should justify the inputs and therefore no additional resources were required. In the middle, some argued for time-related additional resources to pump prime activity. Others unequivocally argued in favour of both additional resources and the need for training on how to locate and access additional funding streams. Indeed, reinforcing the need for additional resources, leader 9 stressed that ‘if we don’t reward effective collaborative teamwork, we shouldn’t expect to get it.’ This view that additional resources are required to support collaborative working is supported by the findings of a number of other recent studies (Hill & Matthews, 2010; National College, 2010; Rudd et al, 2011).

Many of the interviewees explained that they had little experience of applying for additional sources of finance to support collaborative working. In essence, hitherto they had been inward-facing, managing internal costs from central budgets. With collaboration, the situation is far more complex. New sources of finance must be explored and budgets, appointments and accounting procedures need to be shared and synchronised.

A variety of strategies was offered to overcome the challenges of locality. One leader stressed the importance of language. He advocated, for example, the liberal use of phrases such as ‘so, we are agreed on that then’ and ‘let’s do this together’. Drawing on a football analogy, he stated that he often used the phrase:

“Ok, let’s play for the badge on the front of the shirt, not the name on the back.”

Leader 4

Others talked of the need never to assume social capital, but to keep working at it. For them, it was crucial to illustrate commitment to the aims of the collaborative, consistently show interest and support member activities. Whilst two interviewees used Hargreaves’ (2010) phrase ‘love matches’ which needed to be nurtured to ensure success, there was consensus on the need to keep working on openness and transparency to build trust.

In overcoming each of the presented challenges to making a collaboration work, be they political, operational or financial or dealing with issues associated with locality, interviewees continually wrestled with the tensions surrounding self-interest versus altruism. All appeared to want to support other schools, even those with which they were in direct competition. However, there was also a realisation, prevalent among all, that such ambitions had to be tempered by doing what was best for the home institution first.

The individual school and the collaborative

Consensus appears to exist between both theorists (Hargreaves 2010, 2011; Harris, 2009) and practice-focused research (Matthews & Hill, 2010; National College, 2010) on the need for leadership within a collaborative, that leading an individual school is different from leading a collaborative, and that a successful headteacher may not necessarily make a successful system leader.

Interviewees stated that leadership had a central place in collaborative endeavour. However, it represented something of a challenge to traditional approaches that focus on the role of formally designated leaders of single institutions that others then follow. Five of the interviewees described collaborative situations in which they were involved where it was often not possible to easily discern a formal leader, since many of the leadership responsibilities are contested. In these cases, leadership was exercised through personal skills, activities of the collaborative and personal authority (often to access additional resources). The most quoted example of this focused on the decision-making process. Most commonly, in the collaborative situation this took place through discussion and voting.
In the absence of line-management authority, the leader of the collaborative, who was probably elected for a fixed term, had to develop a new armoury of skills to influence rather than determine decisions.

The differences between leading a single institution and a collaborative were regarded as significant. A single school has walls around it and there is absolute clarity on who the formal leader is. Staff within the school naturally look upward for direction and advice. The leader is seen to act with moral authority, has the ability to choose her own team and is the gate-keeper for the school’s agenda. One leader commented:

“In my school, I am leader. I am the place to come with the problems and when there is disagreement I will decide. My face is in the prospectus and my name is on the sign on the entrance to the school.”

Leader 10

This contrasted starkly with the collaborative situation as it was perceived by interviewees. In such circumstances, the leader operates at a distance; any perceived lack of moral principle is instantly challenged; teams can be confrontational rather than complementary, packed with leaders thinking they have the definitive answer; and the agenda can be externally driven or the result of compromise.

Interviewees believed that not all successful headteachers could or would want to lead a collaborative. As one leader succinctly pointed out:

“After all, not all good teachers make good heads.”

Leader 8

Hargreaves supports this view. He observes:

It takes talent to be a successful head... but that talent is not enough for the highest forms of system leadership.

Hargreaves, 2010:15

In describing a number of different and additional personal characteristics and professional competences, interviewees suggested that leading a collaborative can be quite unnatural. One leader expressed it:

“The leader of a collaborative works away in the background, nudging others toward the goal. They must have both belief in others and the system. Most of all, they must not want to be the centre of attention – this is a strange and unnatural experience for many heads.”

Leader 9

Other leaders agreed with this view. One stated that:

“Whilst we must be mindful of the prize, success within a collaborative sometimes means not being on the podium.”

Leader 10

For another:

“The glory of the collaborative is reflected.”

Leader 12

The literature on collaborative working in the corporate world supports this view (Lank, 2006; Doz & Hamel, 1998; Savas, 2000).

In the responses of interviewees, a new language of leadership emerged, in terms of leading from the back, offering suggestions, showing humility, having patience, taking the long-term view, seeking compromise and inviting participation. Nonetheless, whilst subtly expressed, the presence of self-interest was constant, and doing the best for the home school remained key.
That said, the approach was different and where possible, included helping other colleagues to succeed within the collaborative. One interviewee explained it thus:

“The image of the shepherd best describes leadership of the collaborative. The leader has to set the direction, care and guide the group and keep the momentum going. However, the latter is achieved through ‘nudging’ from the back, rather than blazing forward from the front.”

Leader 9

Another interviewee described the nature of leadership in the collaborative she worked in as ‘invitational’:

“People are motivated by self-interest. Our task therefore is to ensure that what we do benefits all involved. We try to establish a series of topics to follow and invite leaders to join. If they choose to participate, it is far more likely that they will give 100 per cent.”

Leader 11

Lank (2006:159) supports such views and discusses the idea of ‘leadership from within’, rather than from the front through command and control.

Noticeably, those leaders operating in a faith context referred to the notion of servant leadership, working through people and sometimes being prepared to show vulnerability in order to achieve goals.

**Personal characteristics**

All responses were classified into three areas, these being ‘values-based’, ‘awareness of self and others’ and ‘intellectual agility’. ‘Awareness of self and others’ was by far the most significant area, with 82 per cent of all responses focusing on this and 9 of the 12 interviewees using the term ‘emotional resilience’ in connection with it.

**Values-based behaviour**

The research found that 8 of the 12 interviewees placed great importance on the role of personal values in determining the behaviour of successful leaders of collaboratives. Responses were dense with phrases such as ‘moral purpose’, ‘commitment to service’ and ‘belief in the greater good’. The interviewees clearly believed that the actions and commitment of successful system leaders must be rooted in delivering the best for children and the education of all, not for personal success or success of an individual school. One leader expressed it as thus:

“We have an obligation, a responsibility to all children. All children deserve to be given the best possible start in life.”

Leader 9

Another stated:

“As headteachers we have a responsibility to work together, to co-operate, to look beyond the school gates and do our best for the children of town X and not just my school or your school.”

Leader 8

Altruism was central to the behaviour of these leaders. Moreover, interviewees expected altruism to be an integral part of the behaviour of others leading collaboratives. For them, it was a requirement:
“For me, leading a collaborative is all about shared responsibility. As a group of heads, or senior educationalists, we have to be serious about joint ownership for the achievements of all children in the education system.”

Leader 10

These views certainly chime well with those of Fullan (2011), who states that a key requirement to develop a self-improving education system is that:

A school head has to be almost as concerned about the success of other schools as she is about her own.

Fullan, 2011:13

Interviewees viewed leadership as an activity (Spillane, 2006), and a highly significant one in terms of collaboratives. In such contexts, personnel have to align and realign themselves depending on the task. Hence, ‘leader’ becomes ‘follower’ according to the situation. These three complex interchangeable variables – leader, follower and situation – are increasingly fluid in the collaborative context. Members of the collaborative must be prepared to be led by others, learn from one another and act with a degree of humility. Concurring with the views of Woods (2011) and Collins (2001), one leader stated:

“To be successful we must be ambitious for the collaborative, not ourselves.”

Leader 8

Awareness of self and others

The emotional nature of leading collaborations was repeatedly emphasised. Successful leadership required the ability to deal with immense pressure, exposure to multiple sources of criticism and stakeholder challenge. Often and for multiple reasons, line-management authority was absent and cultures clashed within a collaborative. A number of interviewees suggested that to lead a collaborative successfully, it is necessary to first lead an individual institution successfully. Such experience was seen as vital in effectively addressing the complex issues emanating from bringing a number of institutions together or leading across long-established professional boundaries.

The comments of two interviewees are particularly illuminating:

“Being a system leader is the most stressful thing I have ever done, on so many levels. It is sometimes necessary to make decisions from a distance and have challenging conversations via email which can be counter-productive, due to misunderstanding. The whole decision-making process, without having the power to say ‘this is what we are going to do’, can be pressured and very time-consuming. Even when you agree on objectives, trusting people to deliver with quality takes time. It is definitely not for the faint-hearted.”

Leader 9

“Confidence keeps me going. I have moved a school from satisfactory to outstanding. This gives me the confidence to believe I know what it takes to be successful. During the tough times, this keeps me going.”

Leader 12

Acute and deep self-awareness was considered vital. Leaders need to know which behaviours they are employing when they are at their best and replicate them. They must deal confidently with challenge, exhibiting authority and presence. Uncertainty, ambiguity and criticism must be dealt with. The leader of the collaborative will most likely have little knowledge of the multitude of interests she is attempting to unite in a core purpose. Emotional resilience was the most often used expression throughout all the interviews.
As one leader stated:

“You must be able to take the knock-backs, turn the page and move on, never losing sight of the endgame.”

Leader 7

Another reinforced this point:

“Collaborative leadership is resilient leadership.”

Leader 12

All interviewees passionately outlined the importance of system leaders possessing outstanding interpersonal skills. Comprehensive lists of qualities were described. The qualities most mentioned included: deep listening, understanding and empathy (see Egan, 2009). To this, interviewees discussed the need for the leader to be a motivator and an enabler, someone who was constantly building social capital, someone who could:

“Make people feel tall, whilst simultaneously holding a mirror to their practice to enable them to face challenges.”

Leader 1

**Intellectual agility**

‘Highly intelligent’ was an expression used by four interviewees and echoed by a number more. Expanding on this, interviewees introduced a number of descriptors. These included the need to be analytical, to be able to understand complex data and situations, perhaps in front of an audience, being able to reflect and effectively employ a range of leadership styles depending on context and the ability to construct compelling argument. As one leader explained:

“This person is the leader of the leaders. They must have presence and radiate authority. They must show understanding, be intellectually nimble and compel the group forward.”

Leader 10

For another interviewee:

“The leader [of a collaborative] has to be a pretty sharp operator. The nature of the beast is that they will be challenged in front of their peers [and] this requires confidence and ability. And, it is sometimes difficult to understand what’s behind the challenge. The leader has to try to create an atmosphere of common understanding.”

Leader 11

**Professional competences**

The National Standards for School Leadership identify leading strategically, leading teaching and learning, leading the organisation, leading people and leading in the community (National College, 2009) as the key areas of school leadership. The findings of this research confirm their importance to the successful leadership of collaboratives.

A number of differences do exist however, particularly with regard to emphasis and the nature of leadership. An emphatic 94 per cent of all responses identifying key professional behaviours focused on the two issues of strategy and people. Simply put, get the strategy right and motivate the people. Three interviewees paraphrased Collins (2001:63): ‘get the right people on the bus first, and then determine the destination’.
Issues of the legitimacy and authority of the designated leader continued to preoccupy the interviewees. They repeatedly stated the need to work on building moral and social capital. The language used by the interviewees, for example, ‘high-level systems thinker’, ‘exceptional communicator’ and ‘remarkable analytical skills’ seemed to indicate the respect possessed for and status conferred on those who lead collaboratives.

All interviewees identified the ability to create and deliver a shared vision that motivated and inspired. However, in a collaborative, this can often be a difficult and uneasy compromise. As one interviewee, referring to the work of Grint (2010), expressed it:

“Leading a collaborative is often about wicked issues and clumsy solutions. Members have to accept that the solution may be an untidy compromise for the good of the collaborative.”

Leader 1

The professional competence, therefore, centred on dealing with issues of ambiguity, uncertainty, rival interests and varying skills and expectations. The skilled leader would, it was felt, accept the ebb and flow of the activity, the dance of leadership, on occasion surrendering influence in particular areas, to maintain an unwavering belief in and focus on the aim of the collaborative.

The skill of leaders to work with and through people from a range of backgrounds was the other identified key professional competence. Within this, the ability to build and sustain effective relationships, communicate clearly and concisely and motivate and hold to account was fundamental.

The leader of a collaborative, interviewees stated, must be able to quickly assess the talents of a range of professionals, evaluate their inter-connectedness and nurture relationships to maximise outcomes. He/she must be able to clearly describe and enrol people into the big picture, deliver a convincing and compelling argument and articulate the rationale for action taken. Interviewees stressed the need for the leader to be able to create a culture that encourages ideas and contributions from others, whilst also holding people to account and challenging any perceived lack of effort; balancing two leadership skills of the very highest order. Some interviewees spoke of collaborations that fizzed with energy and ideas, but achieved little due to poor accountability mechanisms. Others spoke of collaboratives that lacked zip and suffered from poor attendance and participation, often due to the absence of effective leadership. The free-rider problem was a common feature of many collaboratives:

“One rarely attend meetings or contribute much, except when we are discussing distributing finance between different projects. This is not right and should be addressed.”

Leader 11

Others emphasised the need for the leader to possess conflict resolution skills:

“Different stakeholders, from different institutions, with different agendas meeting relatively infrequently with little respect ... well, that’s a recipe for disagreement and disaster. These need to be sorted quickly if progress is to be made.”

Leader 6

The system leader who can successfully lead through conflict is central to the thinking of much research. Lank (2006), for instance, states:

“A collaborative leader needs the patience and skill to build consensus and find the win-win, even in difficult, conflict-ridden circumstances.

Lank, 2006:131

Similarly, Surowiecki (2004) argues that decisions within a collaborative are likely to be the result of a complex process of contest, disagreement and compromise. In such situations much is down to the leadership as to whether the collaborative can withstand and accommodate the dissent without imploding or fracturing.
Responses outside leading strategically and leading people (National College, 2010) were child-focused. Interviewees stressed that the leader of the collaborative must not lose sight of the individual child in all activities. As one leader put it:

“Our key reference-point question must be: what is the impact of our action on the pupil? Everything begins here.”

Leader 11

For Hargreaves (2010:15) it is clear: NLEs and LLEs and similar cluster leaders are successful in what they do because they possess ‘additional competences’. Adapting the work of Hargreaves (2010), Matthews and Hill (2010) and Hill (2004) to explore this area, a list of five additional competences thought important to lead a collaborative was produced for testing with interviewees:

— local knowledge (understanding context)
— build relationships (brokering and sustaining relationships)
— distribute leadership (dispersing roles and responsibilities)
— reciprocal process (giving to receive)
— communication (multidirectional communication, in complex and diverse contexts)

Using this model, the interviewees were asked three questions. First, did they agree with the list? How would they rank the competences in order of preference? Finally, what competences were missing?

The findings are significant in terms of their consistency (see Table 1 below). All 12 respondents agreed with the additional competences presented. Four interviewees offered one other factor each for inclusion, these being:

— child focus
— perceived need
— vision
— conflict resolution

Arguably, three of these could be fitted into the competences presented: perceived need into local knowledge, vision into distributing leadership and conflict resolution into building relationships, for instance. Child focus, it could be argued, is a given reference point, worthy of continual statement.

There is little doubt among the interviewees regarding the most important competence in leading a collaborative: nine placed ‘building relationships’ as number one, with the remaining three respondents placing it second. Similarly and perhaps emphasising the moral purpose of this sample, the notion of leading collaboratives being a reciprocal process in which all benefit was considered the least important. All interviewees placed it in the bottom 2 responses and 8 of the 12 placed it last. The significance of distributing leadership and communication was emphasised by the responses, approximately half of which – six for the former and five for the latter – placed either one in the top two.
Developing personal characteristics and professional competences

Theorists (Hargreaves, 2010), researchers (Matthews & Hill, 2010) and those interviewed in this study believe that additional competences are needed to successfully lead a collaborative. If this is so, how have those who currently lead collaboratives developed the additional behaviours and competences to do this?

The similarities in the responses of the interviewees to this question were striking, in particular with regard to approach and attitude. Interviewees saw their careers in terms of learning journeys. They were self-critical and reflective; they were aware of their weaknesses and strengths and worked on both; they expected the best and gave their best. The passion and driven nature of one leader comes through in self-assessment:

“At the core I have certain innate behaviours ... inherent unrest, raw ambition, a horizon-scanning approach; coupled with a fear that the only way is down, so keeping moving.”

Leader 12

There is no obvious common route to system leadership, beyond promotion to lead a single institution then to lead more than one. The notion of a system leader is a recent development to which the interviewees had positively responded. The position hitherto was not obvious and therefore not consciously prepared for.

Nonetheless, the opportunities and experiences the interviewees received throughout their careers had honed their skills and built on what they saw as their innate behaviours. Many different sources and forms of training were discussed. Most commonly, interviewees mentioned on-the-job training, such as leading initiatives within the individual school across departments and then specific initiatives, such as those related to special educational needs, teaching and learning, and assessment for learning across school boundaries.

---

Table 1: Rank order of additional competences (interviewee responses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewees / totals</th>
<th>Local knowledge</th>
<th>Build relationships</th>
<th>Distributed leadership</th>
<th>Reciprocal process</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leader 1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader 2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader 3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Conflict resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader 4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader 5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader 6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader 7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader 8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader 9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader 10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Perceived need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader 11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Child focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader 12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>43</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
<td><strong>32</strong></td>
<td><strong>56</strong></td>
<td><strong>32</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Position</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Hargreaves, 2010; Matthews & Hill 2010, Hill, 2004 (adapted)
It was clear that the chances to lead across school boundaries were most evident in schools that had entered any one or more of a range of school cluster or chain arrangements, such as federations. Less clear however was the extent to which collaborative leaders are made before they lead one; for example, in terms of the requisite skills and characteristics needed or whether they are made through growing in the role. All interviewees considered the nature of leading a collaborative to be fundamentally different from leading a single institution.

For them, it was not simply a case of scale and building up the skills they already possessed. Rather, interviewees suggested that personality traits and innate behaviours are nurtured in the leadership of a single institution and then grow in the leadership of the collaborative.

The National College and The Schools Network (formerly the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust or SSAT) were identified as the two main providers of training. In total, 8 of the 12 interviewees had completed either LLE, NLE or Fellowship Programme training with the National College. One interviewee had completed the executive principal training with The Schools Network.

“The SSAT’s executive principal training was really valuable. Over two years we visited a number of system leaders in their schools. We heard their unique stories and had the opportunities to quiz them, often in front of members of their staff. In doing so, we were able, through reflection, to build on our own skills in preparation for the next stage.”

Leader 9

The two identified key aspects of the training were access to mentors and the opportunity to network with other system leaders. Interviewees really valued the support and challenge of experienced mentors who came from a variety of sources, such as the National College, the local authority, the diocese and peers.

Indeed, different mentors were needed at different times for different purposes. Such individuals provided a sounding board, the space for reflection and an expert outsider view. Interviewees had appeared to create a team around them on whom they could call, depending on the question or issue to be addressed. As one interviewee put it:

“It really helps having ‘Mel’ at the end of the phone to offload to... a bit like ‘wall’ in Shirley Valentine, but my wall offers calm counsel.”

Leader 10

To this end, the National College Fellowship Programme was celebrated as an outstanding forum for mentoring:

“The Fellowship Programme was immensely powerful. I felt that this was a course for, and about me actually. We completed a 360-degree evaluation of our work and roles... this gave me so much to think about. I had a coach who kept pushing me to reflect and consider a whole range of ‘why’ questions.”

Leader 6

Similarly, 11 of the 12 interviewees emphasised the importance of networks to support their development as system leaders. The networks accessed were many, varied and used for different purposes. Interviewees spoke of local informal networks that met frequently to share experiences, national networks that benefited from pooling intellectual capital, and virtual international networks that shifted mindsets.

The opportunity to meet other system leaders on different stages of their leadership journeys was very powerful. Some interviewees were inspired by visits to colleague system leaders, others had formed small communities and met regularly to discuss themed challenges and others were proactive in online forums.
Interviewees talked of system leadership being the next stage of headship. Nonetheless, to be a success, preparation was required, as one interviewee suggested:

“An apprenticeship has to be served, during which mistakes will be made and support will be required.”

Leader 12

The majority of interviewees believed that given the vast array of collaborative structures developing, potential challenges would be complex and context-specific, necessitating bespoke preparation programmes that focused on hands-on experience, supported by opportunities for reflection and learning.
Conclusion

This practitioner research explored the nature of leadership in the collaborative context, defining a collaborative as any initiative involving more than a single institution. More specifically, the research addressed three questions related to such leadership:

1. What are the main challenges?
2. Which personal characteristics and professional competences are key?
3. How can leaders best develop those personal characteristics and professional competences deemed most appropriate?

The literature review shows that there can be significant challenges in and considerable obstacles to successfully establishing and leading collaborative enterprises. This view is expressed in the literature of both the corporate world (Huxham & Vangen, 2005) and the education (Harris, 2009). Stated challenges include a range of issues relating to history and context. Identified obstacles include the political, operational and financial dimensions of leadership.

The views of those interviewed largely corresponded with those contained within the literature. Interviewees were able to reel off challenge after challenge. However, whilst the challenges to be faced were regarded as considerable, so too were the potential benefits. This led the interviewees to remain committed to collaborative working and to devise a range of leadership strategies to overcome potential obstacles. These strategies appeared to be rooted in examples of leadership style. There were those interviewees, for instance, who wanted to address leadership issues through establishing clear processes at the outset, whilst others talked about the skills of negotiation and conflict resolution to secure successful outcomes.

For practitioners the message is clear. Collaborative working is complex and challenging, but many collaboratives are working successfully and the benefits are considerable. For policymakers, there is belief in collaborative working within the profession. Those interviewed expressed their desire for policymakers to be sympathetic to the potential obstacles to successful collaborative working, which are well documented in the literature and this research.

The literature is specific on the leadership of collaboratives. First, it is unanimous in stating that effective leadership is essential for successful collaboration (Harris, 2009; Lank, 2006; Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002). Second, many researchers claim that successful system leaders are so because of additional competences (Matthews & Hill, 2010). Finally, a range of models of behaviours or competences is offered (Hargreaves, 2010; Hill, 2004; Matthews & Hill, 2010).

For the interviewees, leadership has a central place in collaborative endeavour, representing a challenge to traditional approaches that focus on the role of the formally designated leader that others follow. Interviewees identified numerous differences between leading a single institution and a collaborative. These necessitated additional traits.

This research separated these traits into personal characteristics and professional competences. Three areas of personal characteristics emerged from the findings: values-based, awareness of self and others, and intellectual agility. To be a successful system leader, one must have clear moral purpose (values-based), possess deep self-awareness (awareness of self) and exhibit intellectual nimbleness. The picture of a system leader constantly in the spotlight, subject to continual judgement and having to deal with complex situations is presented.
In addition to these personal characteristics, the successful system leader must have all the professional competences identified in the National Standards for School Leadership (National College, 2009). The findings of this study emphasise the importance of strategy and people. First, the system leader must possess and enrol people into the vision. The main criticism of collaborative working is fuzzy-thinking, hence the need for an expert strategist who will provide clarity. Second, she must inspire and motivate people to deliver the vision. In both cases, the system leader may have to operate in a range of challenging situations, perhaps without line-management authority, but with contested collaborative objectives and a complex network of conflicting individual interests.

System leadership is a lifestyle choice. It was viewed by interviewees as extremely demanding and tremendously rewarding. Beyond some initial research into the work of NLEs and LLEs (Matthews & Hill, 2010) – a very specific type of system leader – there is little research on the career progressions of system leaders in education. There was no one way or best approach to system leadership identifiable among this sample of 12 system leaders. However, there were obvious common personality traits among them. These leaders were driven to make a real difference to the life-chances of as many young people as possible. At the core of their journey to system leadership was motivation and innate behaviours, rather than particular patterns of work experience (although there is a degree of inevitability in that) and training.
Recommendations

With collaboration comes a unique set of challenges. The practitioners interviewed in this study stated how they benefited from discussion with other system leaders and how they would welcome further information from action-research projects that explore the challenges encountered and strategies employed to overcome them. They identified a need for examples that work from practice.

To address this, a framework might be devised at policy level for professional leadership development from classroom practitioner to system leader. With respect to the latter, this research provides a survey of the types of approach employed by practitioners. Further work that drills down to the specifics of roles, responsibilities, systems and structures would enrich this. Leaders need, if possible before they begin to lead, ideas, suggestions and questions upon which to reflect.

Most publications related to educational leadership understandably still refer to traditional forms of organisational structures, mostly hierarchical. However, the nature of collaborative work includes, for example, the absence of formal leadership vested in one person, multiple agendas and dynamic states of disequilibrium. There is, it could be argued, a huge demand for more research-informed theoretical development that challenges convention and stimulates innovation. Future policy needs to consider a whole range of new configurations for leadership.

A key message of this research for policymakers is that future system leaders will possess innate behaviours and additional abilities developed through a record of success in a range of different situations. The further development of these abilities will require leadership programmes that begin with the leader and are tailored to their needs and the collaborative context in which they operate. Professional development should be demand-led. It must focus on nurturing the unique and supporting those with the desire and capability to successfully lead across traditional professional boundaries. Emphasis should be placed on the leaders themselves identifying their needs through mentor discussion, network participation and engagement in research. To support this in the future, we could consider the best way to use the wealth of experience that will remain available due to the increase in the retirement age. Those interviewed here call for localised policy, rather than national prescription.

A key driver of future research must be the teaching school alliances. Never before in education has such large-scale collaboration been embarked upon. The first teaching schools have a unique opportunity to create the intellectual capital for those who follow. Their approach may be informed by the question: ‘What would I have liked to have known before I started?’ If Hargreaves (2010:3) is right that clusters of schools are the key to future school improvement, then so too is further research into their leadership.
Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all those in the Federation of Bedford Catholic Schools, the Diocese of Northampton and the National College for supporting and continuing to challenge me on my wonderful leadership journey, to Dr Iain Barnes for his professional advice, Alison Wilshaw (Head of the St Thomas More teaching school alliance) for her proofreading skills and to all those leaders who took the time to answer my questions.

As always, for my beautiful daughters, Francesca and Lauren: you make me very happy.

Visit www.nationalcollege.org.uk/publications to access other full and summary reports.
References


Hargreaves, D H, 2010, Creating a self-improving school system, Nottingham, National College for School Leadership

Hargreaves, D H, 2011, Leading a self-improving school system, Nottingham, National College for School Leadership

Harris, A, 2009, Distributed School Leadership: Developing tomorrow’s leaders, London, Routledge


Jackson, D & Timperley, J, 2007, From professional learning community to learning community. In L Stoll & K Seashore, Professional Learning Communities, New York, Open University Press


The National College exists to develop and support great leaders of schools and children’s centres – whatever their context or phase.

• Enabling leaders to work together to lead improvement
• Helping to identify and develop the next generation of leaders
• Improving the quality of leadership so that every child has the best opportunity to succeed

Membership of the National College gives access to unrivalled development and networking opportunities, professional support and leadership resources.

We care about the environment
We are always looking for ways to minimise our environmental impact. We only print where necessary, which is why you will find most of our materials online. When we do print we use environmentally friendly paper.