

School improvement in the Shared Education Signature
Project: the views of teachers and principals

SUMMARY REPORT

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Introduction

The Sharing Education Programme (SEP) team in Queen's University was invited to examine the views of teachers and principals involved in the Shared Education Signature Programme (SESP) on its contribution to school improvement. A formal review of this aspect of SESP will be available through a comparison of Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 data, but there are limitations to the data and only one cohort data will be available. In addition, the ETI have been reviewing activity in SESP schools and will report in due course.

The SEP team ran the SEP1 and SEP2 programmes which provided the initial testing ground for school collaboration. One important lesson that emerged from that work was the need to empower teachers by recognising their professional expertise and experience. That lesson informs the present study.

The study had two stages: stage one involved interviews and focus groups with teachers and principals in a sample of SESP partnerships. The purpose of this was to gain insight into their perceptions of whether school collaboration had supported their work on school collaboration: where it acted as a constraint we wanted to hear how this was addressed; where it enhanced work on school improvement, we wanted to hear how. Stage two involved an online survey of principals and teachers to check whether the themes emerging from the qualitative work had a more general resonance. Sampling of schools and partnerships was carried out in collaboration with the Education Authority, which also facilitated the online survey.

Stage One - the views of principals and teachers at interview

Eight SESP partnerships from cohorts one and two were approached to participate in the study and six partnerships agreed. Two of the partnerships involved primary schools and the other four involved post primary schools. A total of 14 principals and 31 teachers participated in individual interviews or focus group discussions.

The interviewees highlighted the importance of viewing the contribution of SESP to school improvement in holistic terms: the analysis of Key Stage data was important, but narrowly focused, and some highlighted the relevance of such frameworks as the 21st Century skills of communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking. Given the importance of context in the design and priorities of individual SESP partnerships, they also were not enthused by a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to evaluating the impact on improvement.

Many of the interviewees highlighted the importance of the quality of experience gained by pupils and how this was affected by collaboration. Some suggested that the diversity provided by collaboration had an important impact on character and values education, others talked about the way it promoted respect and self-esteem, while others suggested it broadened their pupils' sense of future possibilities and their capacity to exercise choice. Shared education was said by some to have improved the relationship between schools and their local communities and enhanced local engagement.

Some interviewees reported that SESP had allowed their schools to broaden the range of opportunities provided to pupils, both in terms of the curriculum and broader support. Pupils in shared classes gained a richer experience in addressing such areas of the curriculum as history. When schools pooled expertise and facilities, this also contributed to a wider and richer experience for pupils. Some interviewees reported that their pupils had enhanced their confidence and communication skills, and were more articulate in expressing their views. In some contexts this had been particularly enhanced by the flow of international visitors to schools, eager to hear about their experience.

Making collaboration work effectively had required some schools to rethink some traditional ways of working and led to innovations such as the recasting of the traditional timetable. This, in turn, had afforded opportunities for further innovations in teaching and learning, and the consensus was that this had been to the benefit of pupils.

Other gains highlighted by our interviewees were the enhanced social capital developed through principal networks, with many talking about the way they had begun to develop a sense of shared responsibility for all the young people in the partnership schools. Principals also described how collaboration had strengthened distributed leadership within their schools, by giving new levels of responsibility to middle management teams working to make collaboration effective. Opportunities to give pupils new levels of experience and responsibility had also occurred, in such initiatives as joint schools councils.

Teachers talked about how shared education had encouraged them to deepen and extend their own practice, often as a consequence of being stretched or challenged by colleagues from partner schools. They also talked about the partnership engagement between teachers as providing the basis for fresh and different perspectives that sometimes pushed them out of their comfort zones. SESP also provided new opportunities for formal and informal professional learning. Some even described how their schools had previously been very inwardly focused, even isolationist and protective of their own ways of doing things, but collaboration had opened the schools up to new ideas and experience, allowing for constructive challenge to taken-for-granted practices.

There was some indication that the positive environment for teaching and learning created by collaboration was leading to the pooling and sharing of resources, increased efforts to identify areas where common policies might be developed, and enhanced use to technology for communication and planning. The importance of sustained engagement in collaboration was highlighted by some interviewees who suggested it was becoming a fundamental part of the ethos of the school and opening up productive discussion on the importance of inclusivity. One remarked how school governors had insisted that the first question for candidates for a vice principal post in a school would be to enquire about their experience and commitment to shared education.

Stage two - an online survey of principals and teachers

An online survey was distributed by the Education Authority to the principals of the 350 schools involved in SESP and the 100 coordinators known to the EA. A total of 134 responses were received by the deadline: 55% were from primary schools, 25% from secondary schools, 15% from grammar

schools and 5% from nursery schools; 46% were from controlled or voluntary schools, 43% from Catholic maintained or voluntary schools, 9% from integrated schools and 2% from 'other' schools. Of the total respondents 42% were SESP coordinators, 28% were principals and 28% were teachers. On average our respondents said they had been involved in shared education for 4.7 years.

The main purpose of the online survey was to test the extent to which the themes emerging from the qualitative interviews had a more general resonance. The general conclusion is that they did, in that most of our respondents identified a range of positive outcomes from SESP for school improvement and pupil opportunity. More important, there was hardly any voice suggesting that collaboration had got in the way of school priorities and made their work harder or more difficult.

The survey questions were divided into seven main sections: these included questions asking about the impact of collaboration on pupil learning, school systems for teaching and learning, teachers' work in classrooms, curriculum, opportunities for pupils, opportunities for teachers and any new systems that had been introduced into the partnership schools.

In virtually all areas the patterns of responses were very positive. Thus, for example, three quarters or more of the respondents said that collaboration had provided more opportunities for pupils, improved pupil attainment, provided broader curriculum choice and had enhanced learning experiences. Two third or more of respondents said that collaboration had improved their professional networks and relationships with other teachers, improved CPD opportunities and their access to resources, and improved their teaching strategies. Ninety per cent said that collaboration had enhanced their links with the community and changed school systems for the better.

Equally high percentages of respondents said that collaboration had enhanced teacher confidence, classroom management skills, access to resources, communication with colleagues and their planning, while over three quarters said it had enhanced their ability to meet pupil needs and carry out pupil assessment. We asked about the impact of collaboration on various 21st century skills and large majorities of respondents said it had led to improvement: over 90 per cent said communication and thinking skills had been improved, while three quarters said literacy had improved. Only 57 per cent said numeracy had improved, but even here only four per cent said the impact of collaboration had been ineffective.

A very large majority of respondents said that a range of opportunities provided for pupils had been enhanced as a consequence of collaboration and hardly any said these had been negatively affected. The respondents were very positive about enhanced opportunities for them to attend courses, manage budgets and coordinate others. About half said they had had more opportunity to influence school policy or work with the senior management team. Most said that collaboration had provided them with significant new opportunities to work with colleagues from other schools, share practice formally and, especially, informally, and to observe new approaches to teaching and learning.

It was only in relation to the institutionalisation of collaboration that a more mixed pattern of results emerged from the online survey. A little over a quarter of respondents said their schools had developed joint policies or established a joint school council; a little over 40 per cent had run joint parents' days or engaged in timetable re-alignment, but almost 60 per cent had worked on joint

aspects of their school development plans. On some of these issues, most notably the realignment of timetables, secondary schools were much more likely to have implemented these changes, in comparison with primary schools. There were few differences in the patterns of responses from the different school sectors.

Conclusion

Overall the pattern of results from the interviews and survey are consistent and clear. Teachers and principals identify a wide range of positive outcomes arising from collaboration through school partnerships supported by SESP. More important, there is virtually no evidence that participation in SESP partnerships has created any blockage or constraint on the ability or capacity of schools to advance their core educational missions. Indeed, the evidence lies in the reverse direction in that teachers and principals say that collaboration has enhanced opportunities and outcomes for pupils, improved pupil learning and broadened curriculum choice.

Furthermore, teachers and principals report that collaboration has improved their capacity in many significant ways as well, whether this is through the formal or informal sharing of experience, access to resources and expertise, or opportunities for professional development and learning. There is also evidence that the experience of collaboration, after an average of less than five years, is already leading to the re-engineering of some school systems and processes in ways which is enhancing the learning environment.

A deeper analysis of the data points to areas of work where greater levels of enhancement may be possible. It is also true that the institutionalisation of new practice as a consequence of collaboration lags behind improved practice and engagement, but this is unsurprising: indeed, it may be that the level of institutionalisation of new practice after such a short period of time is, in fact, an unexpected bonus.

The balance of evidence emerging from this study of the perceptions and views of principals and teachers involved in school partnerships in SESP points to a high level of consensus. That consensus is that collaboration is having a very positive impact: it is leading to enhanced opportunities, outcomes and practices, for pupils and teachers, and that it is helping schools not only meet their core educational goals, but to promote positive innovations. Perhaps most striking of all is the almost unanimous view that pupil and teacher confidence has been enhanced by participation in shared education, thereby confirming that old adage that none of us is more effective than all of us.