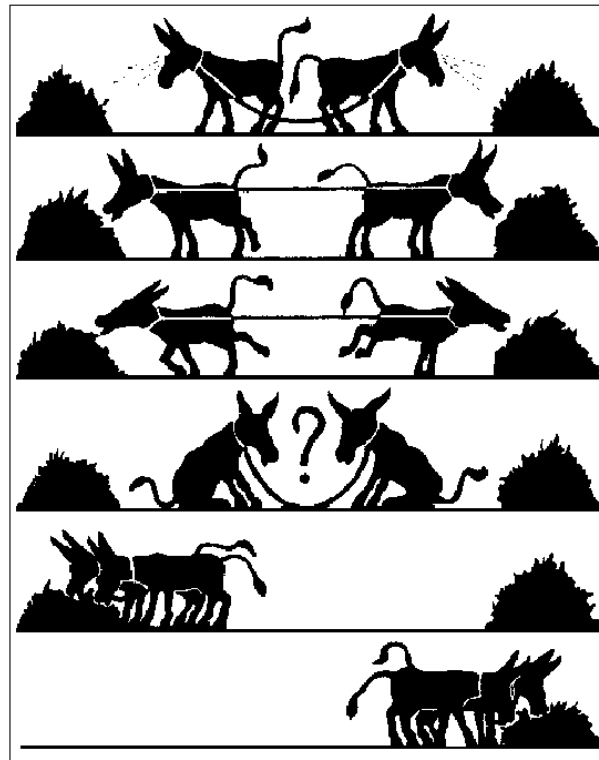


# The process of collaboration between urban schools: identifying agents and beneficiaries



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## Abstract

Collaboration between urban schools is seen by the British government as a significant process in the reform of the education system, and as a potentially powerful lever for the improvement of education in urban contexts. However, whilst the ultimate aim is to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of pupils, it is often unclear in practice who are the key agents and beneficiaries of such processes.

These issues are explored through a case study of critical incidents and key people in several collaborative groups in an urban context. Two basic social approaches are distinguished. In the hierarchical mode of action, shared needs or issues are identified by senior staff in collaborating schools, which then become an agenda for collaborative working involving staff at lower levels in each organisation. Data from meetings and interviews is used to explore how needs or problems are identified, and who is centrally involved in that process. In the grassroots mode of action, staff at lower levels identify a local and specific agenda for action, and take ownership of this agenda in the development of, for example, joint teaching materials or strategies for assessment. In such cases, the general assumption is that collaboration is an inherent good, of benefit to all participating individuals and their organisations, and so of ultimate benefit in improved pupil learning and engagement. Data from participative observation is again used to identify key agents and processes of decision-making, to explore such assumptions. A series of critical questions are used to explore who benefits, and in what ways. Features of urban context provide a reference for judgements about the value of the decisions made and actions taken.

## Introduction

The positive influence between urban schools, so as to raise standards in all, and most especially in the lowest-performing, is something that the government of England and Wales has been striving to bring about for many years. Indirect influence through competition between schools has been the dominant approach to urban school improvement in the last twenty years in England, and to a lesser extent in Wales; it has been seen as successful where schools are thriving, but perverse in its impact on struggling schools. In addition, though, a policy in favour of collaboration has been increasingly pursued. In an as yet unpublished paper, Evans et al (2003) trace the way in which government policy has brought into being Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities clusters, Beacon schools and so on, as structures aiming to promote direct and positive influence between schools to the good of pupils in all of them.

Collaboration, however, is not a simple process, either in the eyes of those collaborating, or for those trying to make sense of influence and change in a system attempting to develop more collaborative working. Through extensive research on collaboration in practice in various business and public sector contexts, for example, Vangen and Huxham (2003) have established a list of themes which

represent generic collaboration issues typically of concern to practitioners and have therefore guided our focus in the development of practice-oriented theory. The theme labels include aims and objectives, accountability, commitment and determination, compromise, appropriate working processes, communication, democracy and inclusiveness (membership), trust, and power.

This paper takes an ethnographic approach to the study of influence within several groups of collaborating schools in one English city. It is based on interviews, but also on suspicion of interviews, given the evaluative task being undertaken in a highly sensitive political climate. Much of the data used in the writing of the paper comes from observation of meetings, and from ongoing discussions over a period of two years with key actors in the setting. The paper attempts to trace decision-making and the agency of individuals and groups within those schools and the LEA of which they are part. It raises and goes some way to answering questions about causality in such a process – the difficulty being identifying what causes what, in respect of institutional change and changes in educational outcomes, when there are so many actors at various levels.

The analysis of the process of collaboration aimed at identifying its agents and beneficiaries, is seen here as a step on the way to understanding its impact (Stufflebeam, 2002). Given that collaboration means many different things to different people, an understanding is needed of how collaboration is conceived by people, but also of what actions and processes are taking place within the collaborative effort. Without an understanding of what has gone on in the name of collaboration, we can be little wiser about what it is that works or doesn't work. Given the complexity of other initiatives and changes underway simultaneously in the schools concerned, we are unlikely to be able to trace the impact of collaboration on outcomes without such detailed knowledge.

It is worth noting too that there is no accepted knowledge of how collaboration should or can develop between schools in England. DfES guidelines offered as part of the 'Leadership Incentive Grant' suggest some indicators for judging the extent of collaboration, but nothing about how it is to be achieved. There should be nothing but admiration attached to the people or schools represented (however anonymously) in

this paper, for the tentative way in which they have moved towards collaborative working. The legacy of years of competition between schools is written into the relationships between people at every level. Developing collaboration involves school leaderships who are still in a competitive situation in needing to rediscover the limits and boundaries of how they can work together.

The educational context in question is an all too common one in English cities: one of widespread underachievement, with some schools in special measures, a high proportion educating young people growing up in challenging circumstances, and several high-performing schools drawing some pupils from more advantaged areas of the city, or from a wide area within it. At a broad level, the collaborative project set up here was motivated by the needs of secondary school pupils in secondary schools – with intended benefits to their educational participation and attainment. However, although the justification for the project was cast in terms of benefits to pupils, these were seen as being mediated almost entirely through the benefits of the project to another group; that is, the leadership, teachers and other staff in secondary schools – with intended benefits to their professional capacities and opportunities. The project was launched in such a way as to generate high expectations among all secondary school staff.

With this background of intention, the attempt to identify the actual agents and beneficiaries of collaboration between schools in more detail leads to some powerful questions. Who stands to gain from decisions taken? And in what ways might they gain? Taking what may well be a realistic view, that in an education system under consideration (in which all parts are under considerable pressure to perform on their own account) the motivation for collaboration is largely a matter of enlightened self-interest, we are left with the question as to the nature of that interest. Preliminary analysis of the collaborative processes underway in the context of study suggest many answers to this question, including: gains in personal standing; improved claim to status within the group; a greater sense of autonomy; improved trust between partners; direct impact on conditions for improvement; resolution of long-standing dilemmas and the solution of long-standing problems.

It is notable then, that the imprecision of the phrase 'enlightened self-interest' leads to the question of values and commitments, and the nature of the moral framework within which educational decisions are made. As an example, one headteacher offered to allow several excluded pupils from other schools in the LEA into his already-full school. The collaborative context had almost certainly influenced the moral context in which he faced this decision – and so also the answers to the question of what he stood to gain. Headteachers in one grouping of schools offered considerable financial and teaching resources, on an ongoing basis, to a struggling school within the group. In doing so, they lost the opportunity to employ additional staff themselves, for example – potentially weakening the educational experience of their own pupils. What was the nature of their gain? To an extent, at least, they gained moral standing as a group, in the eyes of the senior staff of the struggling school, and in the eyes of key officers in the LEA.

Taking such action is not only a matter of recognising self-interest in some form or other. There is also the matter of the development of trust so as to enable actions to be taken despite the risk of being ill-used. Many authors talk of the development of trust between organisational partners as a cycle or loop. For Vangen and Huxham (2003), such trust as derives from

...repeated interactions over time between those who trust and those who are trusted, has been referred to as "relational trust" (Rousseau et al., 1998), "affective trust" (McAllister, 1995), and "identity-based" trust (Coleman, 1990). Historically rooted trust also can be based on a potential partner's reputation in the "market-place" (Ring, 1997) or on other "social structures" (Burt & Knez, 1996). This kind of trust, which is based on credible information regarding the intentions or competence of another (Barber, 1983), has been described as "calculus-based" (Rousseau et al., 1998) (Vangen and Huxham, 2003)

This particular paper is occupied with understanding more about how collaborative actions have become possible, in association with the development of such trust.

### **Critical moments, major processes and key figures in the development of collaboration**

The development of collaborative structures can easily be portrayed by policy makers as a rational and straightforward process. In this case, funding had been made dependent on collaborative action, and expectations were raised by the systematic and highly visible plans of a project team – sufficient explanation, it might appear, for the developments which occurred. As a social process though, all sorts of factors can become significant in the course of developing collaboration: perceptions of relative status, relationships, group memories of conflict or other significant moments. The difficulty of establishing collaboration is well-recognised in the literature:

Out of this research has developed an accumulation of conceptual theory about the inherent characteristics of inter-organizational situations (e.g. Eden and Huxham 2001; Huxham 1993a, 1993b; Huxham and Vangen 1996, 2000a, 2000b; Vangen and Huxham 1998). One overwhelming conclusion from this is that collaborative arrangements are inherently difficult to manage and tend

towards a state of collaborative inertia in which the rate of output seems slow and even successful outcomes are achieved only after much pain or hard grind. It is not surprising, therefore, that there are frequent demands from practitioners for guidance on how to make collaborations work. In general they appear to be looking for some 'magical solutions'--the key to good practice (Huxham and Beech 2003 p.70).

The social nature of the process is reflected in the very different developing history of collaboratives in the city concerned. The number of schools involved, their individual characteristics, the development of shared purpose between school leaders, the extent of opposition to consensus within the groups, leadership and coordination within the group have all been significant factors in determining the nature and extent of collaboration. This means that what is going on can only be understood by learning about the perspectives of different people involved, which includes teachers, school leaders, LEA officers, and private partners. The realities of collaboration are strongly linked to people's perspectives and interpretations. These are subject to change, and with hindsight details of this process can appear trivial. But that is the point of drawing attention to them here. The consideration of the detail of moments in collaborative work in one setting might give some security to others involved in what are often delicate process of developing new structures – personal insecurities and communal uncertainties should be expected.

**a) memorable phrases:** One collaborative began as a relatively uneasy grouping, with the headteacher of one school refusing to engage in the process entirely, and other headteachers quite wary of another school which had not long returned to the LEA after a period as a relatively independent institution. After a slow start, however, some of the headteachers and deputies in the group were beginning to feel that their meetings were a useful discussion forum. As they grew to value each others perspectives and to trust the group with some of their difficulties, they began to identify some shared issues, and to think of possible developments that they might pursue. The LEA facilitator was happy with the progress made. It was during a discussion of emerging possibilities that one of the group, a quietly spoken deputy from the school that had been outside the LEA, interjected, with a particularly well-chosen phrase to express the point of indecision that they had reached, and the dangers of failing to act. The moment, and the phrase itself, was quickly promoted to become part of the group folklore, and at points where they felt there was a lack of decisiveness, someone would mention the key word in the phrase – 'teetering'. It became a useful way of galvanising the group to taking a decision to act.

**b) who's in charge?** For the first year in one collaborative, the LEA facilitator was relied on to run meetings, to draw people together and to provide direction. During that year, the group began to take some joint action, working together on the professional development of teaching staff, and jointly appointing a coordinator to manage and develop initiatives in teaching and learning. As the collaborative became a more solid structure, the LEA began to consider which other developments and initiatives should be linked to it, and sent out an agenda for a collaborative meeting outlining these. This raised alarm bells with the headteachers. Many phonecalls between them ensued as they assessed the group feeling about their position. The next day, they informed the LEA representative that it would be the group who would draw up the meeting agenda, that the meeting would be chaired by one of the headteachers, and that the LEA representative was welcome as an invited observer. The headteachers felt themselves to be exercising a powerful choice about their own future in this action. LEA staff were secure enough and wise enough to see that this was thoroughly in line with the development of collaborative groupings. The relationship between the group and the LEA changed – but did not worsen. Rather, more possibilities for negotiated action emerged.

**c) a two-way process:** It would be a mistake to imagine that support for a once-failing school had no benefits to other collaborative schools. The struggling school in one collaborative was far advanced in some areas of the curriculum, and, partly as a result of the HMI scrutiny they were subject to, they were ahead of others in systematically addressing outstanding issues. In one collaborative coordinators' meeting, an advanced skills teacher from this school described how:

'last September, we were introducing the KS3 strategy, I had three graduate teachers coming in at one end, HMI at the other. I did all the planning to keep them all afloat. Kept two weeks ahead.... But it was a bit of a con to be honest. We've decided to tear it up and recreate it by Sept. Can you find out what other departments are doing? ... I think a lot of [other English departments] are hiding from the KS3 strategy. What I'd like is an honest session about where we are with these objectives... We're still going to do Greek myths, but we're going to pick out a couple of them, not a whole term of it. Do you think that's possible, to discuss that honestly in a twilight? (AST)

The collaborative in question had become used to such leadership from key staff in the struggling school. After the meeting arrangements were confirmed for the head of English at another collaborative school to be invited to attend the next curriculum development session in the English department at the struggling school, where he would given access to the current plans. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that the

collaboration between each of these schools was a two-way partnership, and that the struggling school was contributing considerably.

**d) micropolitics:** In another collaborative, the decision to run a joint inset day meant the involvement of large numbers of staff from the collaborative schools. Unfortunately, a school whose headteacher was very committed to the collaborative had to withdraw from the inset day at short notice, as a result of pressure from parents and LEA, due to the number of days that the school had already been closed due to building works. The management of the repercussions of this unfortunate circumstance was an additional challenge for the collaborative and revealed a lot about the level of partnership attained. It became clear that there were a whole set of micropolitical relationships which had not been worked out, between staff in different schools. People who have no established hierarchy have no problems working together while all is going well, and while all are seen to be contributing equally to the endeavour. The issues come up when there is a problem in terms of fairness and perceived lack of commitment, for example. In this case, the collaborative had appointed a coordinator, and she took a key role in mediation of the difficulties. Shared respect for a co-owned coordinator facilitated ongoing relationships – it was probably the only thing that did.

**e) maintaining the collaborative 'we':** The 'we' of collaboration is a very complex one. There is an articulate deputy head in the highest performing school in one collaborative, for example, who thinks strategically and has many ideas about how the group of schools could work more effectively together. But many of his ideas are also in the best interests of his own school. He is able to answer very clearly the question, 'How do we achieve everything we want to?' – where the 'we' stands for both his own school, and the wider collaborative. This attempt to achieve it all seems suspicious to others.

...we have seen many examples of one organization apparently taking control through taking a strong lead in the creation of an "overarching" plan for the area and then aiming to influence the behavior of the others in line with the plan. Interestingly, managers in these "leading" organizations rarely seem to recognize that their actions could be interpreted in any way other than collaboratively, so their power apparently is often manifested perfunctorily. Those in the "influenced" organizations are, not surprisingly, often much more aware of the power struggle. Our data include many statements about the difficulties associated with management control and about willingness or not to let others take control over shared issues. Some have argued that trust building is dependent on discouragement of "touchiness about each others' territories (Vangen and Huxham, 2003)

So while the collaborative needs to use the capacity of this deputy head to develop the strategic vision, the coordinator in this collaborative needs to ensure that all schools are equally involved, and feel themselves to be involved. Under the surface of a bid for further funding, for example, there are tensions around the intention of Deputy A to develop just one plan, bringing together the collaborative plan and the bid plan to become just one:

Deputy A: I don't think there should be a different collaborative plan. I think the two are very linked.

Head B: A bit like we did with the KS3 strategy; this bid will help us to do what we will need to do anyway.

Deputy A: Geography and DT teachers are meeting regularly in the collaborative and doing sterling work. They would get support and provide a model for the others. That way you don't have to aim for all the subjects (discussion in strategy meeting)

Deputy A's example stresses the value of focusing on those that are doing well in the hope that others will take notice and improve. It implies that the weakest subject areas are actually a lower priority for action, even if they are a continuing concern. Consistently, throughout this meeting, the deputy head is looking for the fit between what already works, what is expected as part of the funding scheme, and what they should consider valuable as a collaborative. They have subject areas where teachers are collaborating effectively. In his understanding, these are areas to focus on. In the context of the high-performing school, it seems to make sense.

**f) Negotiating boundaries with the LEA:** Practice, particularly where it involves new kinds of relationships, is not just about structure or process, but about the interaction between the two. Strauss has conceptualised the process of negotiation as being about the ongoing construction of a 'negotiated order', where the rules, activities, people involved, issues and so on in operation at any one time are dependent on people's actions as much as on the process.

Rather than seeing a relatively inflexible structure with a limited and determinable list of structural properties, we have to conceive of a ward, hospital or any other institution as a structure in process... [with] a potential range of properties far greater than the outsider (the researcher) can possibly imagine unless watching the insiders at work... staff, family, or patients can call on diverse properties

that he never dreamed existed but that became temporarily or more permanently part of the structural processes of the ward (Strauss, 1978 p.258).

It is helpful to see the relationship between the LEA (as represented by particular LEA officers) and the new collaborative structures in the light of this interpretation. Trying to address geographical inconsistencies and so streamline some LEA initiatives, and to equalise the number of schools in each collaborative, the LEA made moves to try to adjust the collaborative make-up this year, by inviting some reconsideration of which schools were in which group. The headteachers in one group were in favour of such a move, seeing it as being in their interests.

The reaction of other collaboratives was swift. They went 'en masse' to an LEA strategy meeting and made it very clear that they would reject any such proposal. In so doing, they were reinforcing their identity and power as a group of schools, to be reckoned with. The LEA accepted their position – and used it to advantage, because it opened up new possibilities. If a collaborative saw themselves as strong, then they were surely strong enough to assist the LEA in resolving the issue of the number of excluded pupils in the authority. It became possible for the LEA to expect the collaborative to become part of the solution to such problems.

### **The post of coordinator**

One particular grouping of six schools has developed the capacity to look strategically at forthcoming government initiatives, and to make sense of them proactively and in pre-existing partnership with each other. There are tensions to be dealt with as they do this – but they are being dealt with. One of the key players in this development is the coordinator of the school grouping, and this is dealt with now in a separate section.

The decision to appoint a coordinator at the level of deputy head, rather than an administrator, was strongly encouraged by the LEA project staff as a way of building in sustainability after the end of the separately-funded project. The idea was supported by the headteachers who agreed to the use of their funds for this purpose. Immediately prior to the coordinator taking up her post, the headteachers had a discussion about the role. Between them, they emphasised the need to pay attention both to strategy and to the practical issues such as arranging payments to staff for the additional activities they undertook.

Head A: We want her to be the living embodiment of enthusiastic (name of project), the champion of the collaborative. To spend time in schools, working out what we do which might be useful for others. mapping strengths and developmental needs across schools. starting to get subject level collaboration, together with the self evaluation of faculty teams.

Head B: First, we need to get the practicalities right, which will make a big difference to my staff

The coordinator began work in September 2003, and quickly began to emphasise this balance, talking about her 'strategic role – I was appointed with the specific purpose of putting ideas into action'. It is a role demanding considerable skill in negotiating with the group of headteachers, in this group each having the will to collaborate, but also with distinctive styles and positions within the group. Another way of summing up what the coordinator does is in terms of a) making connections - eg. part of facilitating the support for various teachers at the struggling school, and b) finding a way to rationalise the *barrage* of initiatives that the schools perceive to be coming at them from all directions, not least from the LEA. But it is also a role full of uncertainty: the coordinator position was about going beyond what already existed, in the name of sustainable and positive change –necessarily without a map. Unsurprisingly, the coordinator is burdened with the question:

How do we set something up which is sustainable? (coordinator)

The developing agency of and around this post of coordinator is worthy of attention. In the struggle for influence over LEA and secondary school policy (around issues such as inclusion, but also softer issues such as collaboration itself, and presentation to external bodies such as DfES), influence over the coordinator has become significant, as suggested by the coordinators' report on a meeting:

I had a meeting yesterday with LEA officers yesterday on leading practice, and how we make sure that everything we do is contributing to impact on achievement. Because that's what it's about. Its fine getting together and getting to know each other but that's not the point (coordinator)

The coordinator has had to build and maintain her own credibility with headteachers. This she has done through working with teachers in need of considerable support, very much in the mode of an LEA adviser. In addition, the coordinator recognised that, given the level of expectations, the perceptions of people other than the leadership group were highly significant in terms of continuing development. A newsletter was launched as a vehicle for influencing these perceptions, visible to the many people outside and within the group who had little knowledge of what was actually going on under the aegis of collaboration. The

newsletter was able to make bold claims about the coherence and efficacy of the group, consolidating the group identity as an active and forward-looking collaborative; it highlighted the many activities in schools in which the group was a key part.

During the last year, the grouping has been grappling with the key issue of who the key agents of collaboration should be. Should the direction of collaborative activity be established through general agreed themes imposed across the collaborative, or should staff in schools be encouraged to develop links around the sharing of strengths and seeking assistance with particular areas for improvement? The critically reflective capacities of the coordinator have been important in engaging with this issue. Joint inset days involving staff from all schools have required a major investment of energy in preparation, but they have provided learning opportunities for the group and for the coordinator in particular. For example,

We had a joint inset day on questioning and engagement, with all the materials from DfES to back that up. But staff were not engaged; they didn't feel that the day reflected their priorities. It was [just] one more initiative to them.

The day had gone well in many respects, but there was a feeling of lack of connection with the issues that really concerned some of the various staff groups. Six months later, staff engagement in the collaborative was seen as a key issue. The coordinator and headteachers raised questions about the focus and mechanism which might develop the engagement of a wider group of staff in systematic collaboration. The plans for the next inset day were worked up by school co-ordinators with the collaborative coordinator, in a series of meetings early in 2004. The day had no agreed theme such as 'assessment for learning', even though this was something lots of schools were thinking about at that time. The coordinator described the planning of the day as starting with the issue of engagement, and moving from there towards strategic sharing of good practice.

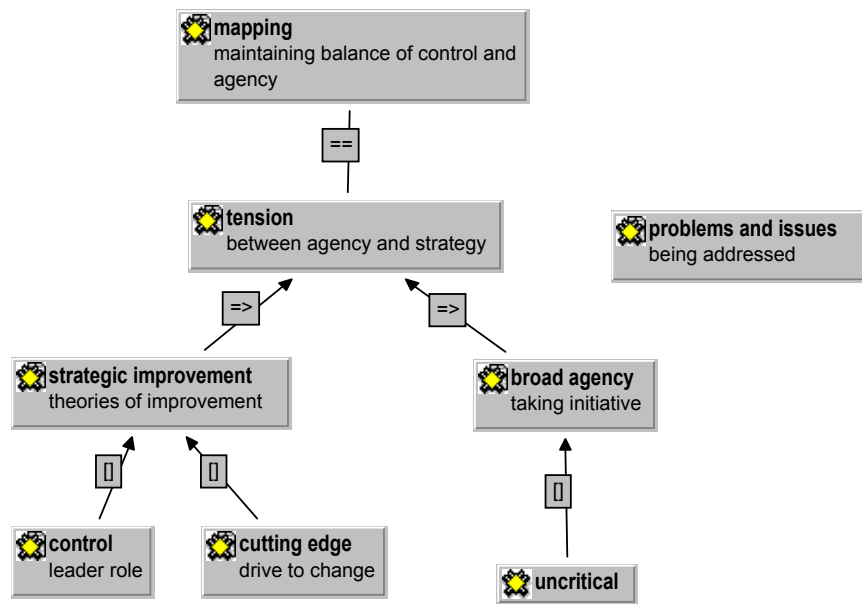
For this day, I took a step back, asking the question, how do we start it off? How do we get teachers engaged? We did do quite a lot of managing - what people were allowed to present was managed first of all through the coordinating group and then through the SLTs. The basis of it was that they were to present areas of strength and weakness which had come from an audit. And it should be a validated audit, with me or the link adviser doing that for example. But I don't think they did that in practice. I think they presented work that was easy to present, and to explain. And it was of variable quality. I took the 'good' out of 'sharing good practice' and left it as sharing practice. Because there is no point in sharing practice which isn't good.

The tension between strategic collaboration and generating the broad involvement and ownership of more staff over collaborative actions was very real in the preparation for this day. There was seen to be no point in sharing practice which wasn't good, but neither there was any point in teachers leaving the day feeling as though they had nothing meaningful to exchange with each other. In working with this tension, the coordinating team for the inset day 'did do quite a lot of managing - what people were allowed to present was managed first of all through the coordinating group and then through the SLTs'.

These tensions are clarified in the following diagram<sup>1</sup>:

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<sup>1</sup> See also Appendix 1 for examples of practice



For the coordinator, mapping good practice across the collaborative was a way of balancing control and encouraging the recognition of broad agency in the process of change, and resulted in the production of a directory of good practice. But frustrations quickly surfaced around the unwillingness of staff in schools to use the directory to pursue their own links with staff in other schools. The lessons about the slow and tentative nature of collaborative development at the level of senior staff were hard for them to recognise in terms of the needs of their teaching staff.

By June 2004, the decision had been taken to focus the plan for the group on a bid for further funding which entailed a tight focus on activities in classrooms. Things which don't fit that focus will be dropped – so the group is now moving away from the idea of promoting collaboration across all subject departments, for example through the appointment of subject coordinators, and decided instead to be more focused on particular issues. Coming to this decision is against the interests of some staff. It involved rejecting some possible ways forward, and the energy and motivation that some teaching staff were getting prepared to offer:

A science coordinator for the collaborative would have made a difference. A lot can be done, not only through getting together; someone could come in, look at schemes of work, mix and match, a paper exercise, creating some joint materials. Someone coordinating the feedback on things as they are developed and shared. Lots of people have email contacts, and most of these materials are now produced electronically. 'Thanks, this is what I've done with it, here's something we've produced', and so on... Meanwhile, instead of sharing ideas, we are each developing our own schemes of work. This is ongoing and independent. But it's a waste. We could modify each others (head of science in one collaborative school)

Unintentionally, the coordinator's position turns out to be a very exposed one, whilst appearing to provide great autonomy and influence. On the one hand, the coordinator has knowledge which few others have - most crucially, a detailed knowledge of weaknesses in schools; but because he or she is on the edge of the communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) that they serve, they are able to put that knowledge to use only with great care.

Receiving feedback – valuation – about the value and direction of his or her work is a critical issue. Not being fully part of a community, the coordinator has no access to the informal daily feedback that she would receive as a senior manager in school, through casual conversations and in the course of meetings, and directly from pupils and teachers. LEA advisers can provide some of this needed feedback, for since they regularly work outside school communities, they have constructed an alternative community with established modes of working, norms of good practice and so on. But the coordinator is not an LEA appointment, rather it is a school one – the coordinators work for the schools and their collaborative interests. The coordinator is therefore restrained from becoming more reliant on the LEA for feedback, and it is unsurprising that she expresses desire for feedback and 'answers'.

Just to say I do appreciate the feedback about collaborative progress, there are very few people to refer to at times. I suppose I'm interested in answers as well as observations, so these would be gratefully received... (collaborative coordinator)

Comparing the coordinator's position with that of the LEA link adviser, a crucial difference is the community of link advisers, with a senior advisor and a history and nationwide phenomenon of advisory posts. This community means that, whilst their role continues to change, they have collegial and institutional resources to make sense of that changing role. Meanwhile, what constitutes good advisory work is determined partly by tradition, partly by senior managers, and although it is subject to change, it is recognised by senior managers through their experience of advisors in other places and earlier years.

In dealing with problems, the coordinator is more likely to look to her own resources, or those in the school or in other schools, rather than going to other LEA staff. This makes them much more attractive to the headteachers, most of whom feel that they lose less power to the authority when they require less from them. The coordinator role, more so than the advisor, invokes issues of loyalty and trust. Nonetheless, the advisor provides something of a benchmark of good practice for the coordinator. In imagining what the coordinator might do, heads have considered the role of the advisor. In the example in the failing school in the collaborative, the role of intensive assistance to weak teachers is something that the LEA link adviser and the coordinator were both involved in.

In the face of this ambiguous position, strategies pursued by the coordinator in search of stability in this collaborative include: seeking out particular people in schools to work with; alliances with other coordinators and with particular advisors as individuals. These can be invaluable partnerships - providing confirmation of worth and direction; clarity of purpose.

### **Towards conclusions: themes and language around the development of collaboration**

As suggested earlier, the value of this study lies in helping to demystify the process of developing collaboration between schools. The focus of has been on identifying the key agents and beneficiaries of the process, in an attempt to unpack it. In the particular collaboratives subject to this study, the issue of agency is linked to generating a moral context in which activities to the benefit of a wider group of people become justifiable and acceptable. The following concepts, drawn out of this attempt to identify the agents of collaboration, may assist in the demystification process:

- The significance of **rhetoric** in generating and managing expectation
- **Generating a moral context** – for altruistic behaviour by headteachers and others, expanding their sphere of concern
- **Coordinators as points of influence** – attracting many people seeking influence over events
- Tension between **strategic and grassroots action** – with the issue of quality written heavily into this
- **Negotiations** - generating new structures and possibilities between groupings
- **Solid focus to collaboration** – rather than pretence or meetings for the sake of form. 'It is about who respects who, who pays attention to who, and why. What you need is 'solid things' and you don't get those by bobbing in and out' (headteacher)

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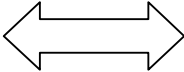
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Appendix 1

How actions are decided on and developed - strategic development and agency

<b>strategic development - to improve city schools</b>		<b>TENSIONS BETWEEN STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT AND AGENCY</b>  	<b>agency – taking initiative, taking a lead, deciding to be involved, making an offer</b>  individual investment in collaboration	
<b>FOCUS eg</b>	<b>ACTIVITY eg</b>	<b>THEME</b>	<b>FOCUS eg</b>	<b>ACTIVITY eg</b>
- alternative provision at ks4  - vocational education  - identifying places for excluded pupils	- debating whether all activities have a focus directly on pupils  - linking with potential providers, sharing current courses  - opening routes to accept pupils over the legal limit (LEA)	<b>DEALING WITH THE UNDERACHIEVEMENT AND EXCLUSION OF PUPILS</b>	- the needs of excluded pupils	head decides to accept additional pupils (risk-taking in collaborative context)
- in-service training activities  - LIG self and peer evaluation of heads	- a feedback cycle to 'generate momentum', avoiding stagnation.	<b>PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT</b>	- professional support	mutual support through collaboration (exception: <i>coordinators</i> feel somewhat vulnerable and isolated)
- developing information systems between schools		<b>RESOURCES</b>	- curriculum development	selective exchange of resources between heads of department - safe strategy in the context of low trust
- high profile collaborative events	Sustained encouragement by coordinators to ensure focus, success	<b>PARTICIPATION</b>	- high profile collaborative events	phases of adoption by teachers
developing links to other funded initiatives	- commitment to meetings  - research (eg on coursework arrangements) to link between schools and provide data to establish priorities  - developing collaborative identity	<b>MAINTENANCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF COLLABORATION</b>	- resourcing, commitment of senior staff	challenge raised by coordinator