

**School collaboration and social capital in a divided society: a case  
study of Northern Ireland**

**Summary of Findings**

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## **Acknowledgement**

This publication is based on doctoral research which was conducted at the School of Education Queen's University Belfast.

## **1 Introduction to the study**

This study is concerned with collaboration between post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. The study seeks to draw out the experiences, meanings and understandings of principals, teachers and pupils involved in collaboration. The study is informed by social capital theory and is underpinned by Putnam's (1993, 1995, 2000) conceptual framework of social capital.

## **2 Aim of the study**

The aim of this study is to investigate the ways in which cooperation and tension is evidenced within relationships between schools in Area Learning Communities in Northern Ireland and to add meaningfully to our understanding of school collaboration.

## **3 Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative approach which is used to illuminate the complexity of relationships underpinning school collaboration. Semi-structured interviews with principals and teachers were carried out together with pupil focus groups and classroom observation.

## **4 Data collection and analysis**

Case study schools comprise of schools representative of the two main communities in Northern Ireland and grammar and non-grammar sectors. Data were collected from seven schools in two Area Learning Communities between May and October 2010. Thematic data analysis, using established procedures, (Miles and Huberman, 1994) was used to interpret the data.

## **5 Findings**

As a result of the data analysis process four key themes were identified. The themes interconnect and cross cut each other. The themes are:

- The Area Learning Community Drivers
- Relationships in the Area Learning Community
- Benefits of collaborative working
- Challenges of collaborative working

## **5.1 Theme 1 The Area Learning Community Drivers**

- The curricular offer is perceived by principals to be the incentive for partnership working. This suggests that collaborative working is characterised by shared goals and mutually beneficial partnership arrangements. The curricular offer is regarded as a more important consideration than the school sector or perceived denomination of the partner school.

## **5.2 Theme 2 Relationships in the Area Learning Community**

### *5.2.1 Nature of relationships*

- Collaborative working appears to provide opportunities for principals, teachers and pupils to interact and develop relationships with members of different communities and across educational sectors
- School leadership is deemed to be important in setting the ‘tone’ for collaborative relationships
- Principals, teachers and pupils emphasise that good relationships exist between partner schools
- Relationships at all levels are complex and dynamic
- Some relationships appear to be fragile
- Principals and teachers tend to focus on commonalities and avoid perceived differences
- Some relationships between principals are characterised by polite discussion which appears to mask deeper differences.

### *5.2.2 Trust*

- Principals and teachers indicate that trust is a key feature of collaborative relationships which serves to help make the process of collaboration smoother
- Principals perceive there to be differences in trust between partner schools and other schools in the Area Learning Community suggesting the existence of different types of trust
- The formation and sustainability of trust within partnerships can be problematic
- Trust is fragile and can be compromised.

### 5.2.3 *Pupil relationships*

- Pupils enjoy the opportunity to mix with others from different schools
- There are limited opportunities for pupils to mix with each other in the shared class
- Pupils would like more opportunities to get to know one another
- Pupils' subject choices are influenced by their career pathway. The 'shared' nature of some subjects does not appear to influence subject choices
- Pupils indicate a willingness to discuss sensitive issues directly with other pupils. This suggests that some pupils are willing to enter into dialogue with each other on areas of difference
- Some pupil relationships first established through partnership working appear to have developed into friendships which extend beyond the school and across different communities
- Some pupils experience a sense of alienation in the shared class.

## 5.3 **Theme 3 Benefits of collaborative working**

### 5.3.1 *Educational benefits*

- Collaborative working produces mutual benefits for all the partners involved
- The curricular offer and improved examination results are highlighted as benefits of partnership working.

### 5.3.2 *Wider benefits*

- Partnership working is perceived to have a wide range of benefits
- Principals and teachers perceive that openness, respect and tolerance are fostered by partnership working thus reflecting that collaboration may contribute to community relations
- Principals and teachers perceive that they benefit both professionally and personally from participation in partnership working
- Principals have developed strong professional and personal relationships with principals from partner schools

- Principals perceive that partnership working benefits pupils in the shared class, the whole school and the wider community
- Some pupils appear to have established relationships with others from the shared class outside school and keep in contact with each other through face to face meetings and social networking sites. Thus collaborative working provides opportunities for pupils from different communities and sectors to form relationships.

## **5.4 Theme 4 Challenges of Collaborative Working**

### *5.4.1 Logistical and financial challenges*

- Funding, transport, school location and timetable coordination appear to impact negatively on partnership working.

### *5.4.2 Educational context*

- Competition between schools is perceived to be a barrier to collaboration
- The perceived pressure and lack of support from the Department of Education together with the administrative requirements of partnerships working are identified as barriers to collaboration.

### *5.4.3 Culture and ethos*

- Collaboration appears to be constrained by school culture and ethos. The standardisation of timetable presents particular difficulties between schools from different communities suggesting that cultural differences strongly influence partnership working
- Differences between teaching styles employed in grammar and non-grammar schools are also noted as barriers to collaboration, indicating that schools with a different educational philosophy may find partnership working problematic. Thus whilst there appears to be a willingness to work together, partnership working between schools appears to be impeded by school culture and ethos.

### *5.4.4. Accountability*

- Collaboration appears to be hindered by the tension created by the desire to oversee the needs of the school and at the same time contribute to the Area Learning Community.

## 6 Conclusions

### 6.1.1 Implications for Area Learning Communities

#### 6.1.2 Relationships

- Collaborative working has a number of complex dependencies which are interconnected. Collaboration is not simply about providing the formal structures and mechanisms to facilitate joint working but consideration must be given to the nature of relationships that underpin partnership working.

#### 6.1.3 Culture and ethos

- Collaboration appears to be constrained by school culture and ethos. This suggests that in promoting collaboration and fostering partnership between schools, some consideration needs to be given to sharing information about school culture and ethos with partner schools thereby making the process of collaboration less problematic.

#### 6.1.4 Educational context

- Collaboration is influenced by the wider educational landscape. In particular competition seems to have made collaboration between some schools difficult

#### 6.1.5 Pupil experiences

- Some pupil experiences indicate that shared classes can result in alienation thus reinforcing difference and fostering a negative experience of interaction with pupils from another community or sector. Collaboration also appears to promote positive experiences of interaction as some pupils have established and maintained relationships with pupils they have met in the shared classes thereby bridging perceived differences. Consideration should be paid to the views and experiences of pupils which can help inform principals and teachers about both the positive and negative impact of school collaboration.

#### 6.1.6 Fostering good relations, tolerance and respect

- Principals and teachers articulate the view that partnership working could promote tolerance and respect for difference reflecting that school collaboration is placed within the broader framework of community relations. Although they have developed strong professional relationships, principals and teachers, appear to avoid issues which they perceive to be sensitive and therefore may have the potential to jeopardise relationships. This research suggests that there are limited opportunities for open discussion which is critical for the development of deeper relationships that foster tolerance and respect and which underpin social cohesion.

- Pupils indicate a willingness to discuss sensitive issues directly with other pupils. This suggests that some pupils are willing to enter into dialogue with each other on areas of difference. The lack of acknowledgement of difference appears to have had a negative impact on some pupils and their relationships in the shared class. Thus, in striving to ignore difference and focus on commonality, some schools appear to have done the opposite by reinforcing difference and alienating some pupils. This also contradicts the principals' perceptions of the inclusive nature of individual schools and emphasises the disparity between principal and teacher perspectives and the experience of some pupils. Consideration, therefore, should be paid to the ways in which pupil experience and issues of difference can be explored in collaborative relationships.



## References

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