

## **Competing values: how viable are collaborative partnerships in the competitive environment of England's education system?**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper is a study of collaborative partnerships in education. It uses qualitative research methodology to explore case studies of three partnerships within a British city. Written from the 'insider' perspective of a headteacher, it uses personal reflection to make sense of experience in relation to a context of unprecedented change in education (Greany, 2015, p. 19), which is driven by 'technologies of power' (Ball, 2003, p. 215), especially market forces, performativity and managerialism. These technologies of power have established a new moral environment (Ball, 2013, p. 25) which is at odds with the values of moral purpose (Fullan, 2005, p. 68).*

*From analysis of interviews with school leaders the paper describes the benefits and drawbacks of partnership working in terms of collective power and collective impotence. It proposes a framework for what makes partnership succeed or fail, but with the major proviso that the most apparently secure partnership can be swept aside by the whims of government.*

Hargreaves (2010, p. 5) presents the idea of a "self-improving school system" in which clusters of schools accept responsibility for self-improvement. His ideas build on the arguments for a 'sustainable' system put forward by Fullan (2005). 'The self-improving system' went on to develop as a central theme for government policy, and, according to Greany (2015, p. 7), it arguably became "the defining feature of the coalition's approach". The House of Commons Education Committee's report on school partnerships and cooperation (2013, p. 10) described hearing "near-universal support for the concept of schools collaborating in order to provide a better service for all children and young people." With such strong political and professional support, establishing and maintaining partnerships should be easy.

It isn't.

**Context: things fall apart**

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

**William Butler Yeats (1994)**

*from The Second Coming*

School leaders across England are struggling to come to terms with rapid changes in the education system. There are major changes to the curriculum, the examination system, the inspection system, the status of schools, the relationships between schools and the role of local authorities. It is a time of “mere anarchy” (Yeats, 1994). Greany (2015, p. 19) describes “the sheer pace and scale of reform across most aspects of the system” and he describes the change since 2010, ie under the coalition government, as “breathtaking” (p. 1). Crossley-Holland (2012, p. 13) speaks of “the unprecedented pressure” that government changes put on schools. Coffield et al (2008) complain of “the frenetic pace of change” and “the torrent of new policy that rains down on each sector”. Some leaders relish their new autonomy within academies and revel in their freedom from the bureaucracy of local authorities; others see only “*the blood-dimmed tide*” (Yeats, 1994), as trusted former colleagues retire or take redundancy and there are no longer any buffers between themselves and the government’s “passionate intensity” (ibid).

As a practising headteacher, facing this storm of change, the idea of school-to-school collaborative partnerships in local clusters, with a strong moral purpose and with schools and teachers taking ownership, provided me with a professional and moral anchor – a “centre” (ibid) to hold. I decided to make a study of collaborative partnerships for my professional doctorate thesis to try to determine their benefits and drawbacks and to analyse what factors would determine their success. Having been involved in three

collaborative partnerships already, I chose to make a case study of partnerships in my authority and to use these three partnerships as examples.

## **Methodology**

The methodology of my study was to use grounded theory as a research strategy within auto-ethnography.

Auto-ethnography “seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273). This suited my purposes: I wished to analyse my experience as a headteacher in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the cultural experience of education in England. Furthermore, one of the strengths of auto-ethnography is that it “acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don’t exist.” (ibid). The issues I was writing about are close to me, and I feel quite emotional about them. I wished to be able to express those emotions freely and to use them as part of the analysis rather than pretending to be an objective observer.

Grounded theory uses inductive reasoning processes to explain human behaviour; this means that the researcher does not start with a hypothesis and try to disprove it, but rather the researcher first collects data, analyses it and generates a hypothesis (El Hussein et al., 2014, pp. 1-2). Grounded theory allowed me to build ideas from an analysis of my own experiences, and then, at the end, to compare those ideas with the analysis of established theorists such as Hill (2008), Hargreaves (2011) and Fullan (2005).

## **My case study**

My case study looked at three examples of partnership that I had been engaged with in “Northborough”, a deprived city in the north of England. One, a partnership between schools and the local college to manage collaborative sixth form centres, had showed long-term strength and stability, but was starting to falter. The second, a partnership to manage joint vocational centres for 14-16, was a bubble: for a brief period it had been spectacularly successful, but was now on the point of collapse. In my third, I was involved with headteacher colleagues in abortive efforts to establish a new over-arching partnership

which could coordinate and support the work of schools as the resources of the local authority collapsed and fragmented.

### **Example 1: collaborative sixth forms**

Three of Northborough's schools were Roman Catholic 11-18 schools with their own sixth forms. From the remaining fourteen 11-16 schools, twelve entered a partnership with Northborough (further education) College to develop four collaborative sixth form centres to serve different parts of the city. The remaining two schools held out (unsuccessfully) to develop their own sixth forms. Each of the 11-16 schools in the partnership was linked with one of the sixth form centres, and students at the school were encouraged to see that centre as 'their' sixth form. The heads of each of the 11-16 schools became associate principals of the sixth form centres, and the group of associate principals worked with the college and the head of centre rather like a board of governors. The partnership has been stable for eight years, but one school has now opted out to develop its own sixth form and, with the pressures of competition, others are reviewing their options.

### **Example 2: Northborough Futures**

Two schools each had about £500,000, which they used, with the support of the local authority, to develop two vocational centres. They made these centres freely available to the partnership of 17 schools on condition that schools worked together to develop the 14 vocational diplomas which the (Labour) government required all schools to offer by 2013. The schools collaborated to write courses, train staff and develop a coordinated timetable so that by 2010 all the schools were able to offer all 14 diplomas to any child in the year 10 cohort. This was an astonishing achievement, matched by very few schools or partnerships anywhere in the country. However, in 2010 the government changed, and the new (coalition) government cut the funding for diplomas, introduced the English Baccalaureate to favour academic and disfavour vocational courses, and removed any requirement for schools to offer the diplomas. What had been an outstanding success became an expensive liability almost overnight, and the partnership had to lay off 30 staff and abandon its newly developed facilities.

### **Example 3: 'one.education'**

In 2012 Northborough Local Authority recognised that it would have to make major changes to its role in order to accommodate pressures from the government. Northborough looked at its proud tradition of partnership, especially between secondary schools, and decided that it had an opportunity to try to create a new partnership, led by schools, which could work alongside the rump of the local authority to support children in the city. This ambitious and far-sighted vision was one.education. Unfortunately, that was about as far as it went. The local authority tried to engage headteachers with this vision, but failed. Headteachers faced what Crossley-Holland (2012) describes as “*a perfect storm*” of government changes to the curriculum, to floor targets, to Ofsted assessment, to funding, to school structures and to pay and conditions: “*mere anarchy*” (Yeats, 1994). No-one, in these circumstances, was prepared to sign up to anything, and one.education collapsed.

### **Interviews and key issues**

I conducted eight semi-structured interviews with key participants in the three partnerships I was concerned with. Jack, Robert and Paul were all fellow secondary heads. Mark was a former secondary head from within the authority, but had become deputy director of Children’s Services, and was responsible for initiating the whole-authority partnership. Neville was vice-principal of Northborough (further education) College. Sandra was a primary head who had been seconded to the local authority to support the whole-authority partnership. Peter was manager of the joint centres in our vocational partnership. Beverley was a senior manager within the local authority. It was easy for me to get access to the interviewees because they were all friends and colleagues. I addressed three broad issues: 1) What exactly do we mean by collaborative partnerships? 2) What are the benefits and drawbacks of being involved in collaborative partnerships? 3) What makes a partnership succeed or fail?

#### **1) What do we mean by collaborative partnerships?**

I began by defining a collaborative partnership as *a planned, formal arrangement between independent bodies to combine their resources, sharing risks, rewards and responsibility, to create or achieve something they could not manage alone*. This definition matched the

views of my interviewees, though they put a strong emphasis on “real partnerships”. Jack speaks of “genuine partnership” and complains bitterly of “partners who claim to be partners but don’t act like partners.” Peter and Robert both contrast partnerships with service providers; in each case they see the difference in the way that partners respond to problems. Robert says, “Partnerships are about reaping the benefits, but also providing the solutions.” He speaks warmly of the way that partners came together to address issues at Northborough Futures: “that’s where it dawned on me that partners instead of running away when there was a problem, need to actually come together.”

Another feature of collaborative partnerships is that they are voluntary and they are equal. For Robert, federations or academy chains are not real partnerships: “Some of those are no-option partnerships. The partnerships I’m talking about are where you’ve gone to the table because you want to be there.”

## **2) What are the benefits and drawbacks of being involved in collaborative partnerships?**

Analysing the responses of my interviewees, I found that I could summarise the benefits and drawbacks in terms of *collective power* and *collective impotence*.

### *Collective power: the benefits of partnership*

Robert says, “the collective was far more powerful than the individual”, and this sums up the benefits of collaborative partnership: collective power. This collective power is of four sorts: *intellectual power* gained from the exchange of knowledge and ideas; *practical power* gained from combining resources, *social power* gained from mutual support, and *moral power* gained from a mutual focus on the needs of students and the community.

### *Intellectual power*

One of the most important benefits of partnerships is in the sharing and debate of knowledge and ideas. Robert says, “We benefited a lot from hearing what other people were doing”. Jack says, “we pick up useful strategies and tactics from other schools”. Neville emphasises the importance of debate in relationships with other colleges: “to share

information, to share approaches to doing things and to have that debate about things as well.”

#### *Practical power*

A major benefit that partnership can bring is in the sharing of finance and resources. As Jack explains, “the pooling of funding of schools allows relatively small amounts of money that are not as useful on their own to become contributors to something that’s much more valuable”. Neville makes the same point about the sixth form provision: “the partnership arrangement, mean[s] that there is significantly more provision that they can access.”

#### *Social power*

A key aspect of social power is mutual challenge and support. Sandra says, “the positive and most valuable outcome for you is emotionally you’re not on your own”. Mark speaks of sharing the “psychological” load. The element of challenge is important; Robert says of the secondary headteachers’ partnership, “I think some of the most successful things we’ve done as a group is challenge each other.” For Sandra the mutual support is particularly important in the context of the apparent disintegration of the local authority and the loss of supportive relationships: “you would pick up the phone, and somebody’s left, or somebody’s gone or somebody’s taken early retirement. So you then realise that you have start to make your own solutions, and you couldn’t stand necessarily alone.”

#### *Moral power*

Interviewees are unanimous in saying that there is a strong moral case for partnerships. Paul is unequivocal: “There is an absolute moral case”, and he goes on: “if you don’t have a broader commitment to young people and to making society a better place, . . . you shouldn’t be in teaching.” Many of the interviewees focus on what Robert refers to as “the common good”. Jack says that there is “a collective responsibility for all of the children in the city”. A key part of moral purpose is in supporting the most vulnerable. Jack says that “there is great risk in not having partnerships and working in a purely competitive manner to the most vulnerable families and the most vulnerable children in the area that we work in.”

### *Collective impotence: the drawbacks of partnership*

The drawbacks of partnership mirror the benefits: *intellectual impotence* arising from inflexibility; *practical impotence* arising from costs and logistics; *social impotence* arising from diverse agendas and differing levels of commitment; and *moral impotence* arising from institutional interests.

#### *Intellectual impotence*

Although partners benefit from the collective power of a partnership, they pay a significant cost in terms of their own flexibility. Neville speaks of the difficulty of having to convince all the partners in order to make a change to take the partnership forward. Paul complains that the secondary heads' partnership was a "big multi-purpose quite clumsy partnership" where the heads would get together and talk "and I'd feel none the wiser." He has the same concerns about the proposals for whole-authority partnership: "It just wasn't sufficiently flexible, fluid or intelligent enough."

#### *Practical impotence*

Partnership working can be a drain on resources at all levels within a school. Jack says "it's not just at a senior level, it's also at middle leadership level, and right down to teacher level." The financial cost of the vocational partnership turned out to be a significant drawback. When schools had sufficient money they were willing to pool a part of it for an exciting new initiative. However, when budgets became increasingly tight with austerity, they were no longer willing to pay. Logistical problems can cause blockages in a partnership. Mark highlighted the difficulties of organising the vocational partnership because of its size and scope: "what we were trying to do was to organise a curriculum for a sector of the city, and sometimes the whole city."

#### *Social impotence*

Within a partnership different partners will have different agendas. Neville says that sometimes "you spend your time trying to please everybody within the partnership rather than actually focussing on what needs to be done." Jack highlights the problem of securing commitment and trust within a competitive environment: "there has to be a willingness to share, and when there is a competitive situation then that's difficult." Sandra is more concerned about the different personalities and their relationships: "The drawbacks are

personalities . . . the more people you get within a partnership the greater the complexity of the relationships.”

### *Moral impotence*

Neville argues that there can be a moral case against partnerships. He says that, as businesses, schools and colleges must make decisions for the benefit of their institutions. Robert also recognises that the moral position is not straightforward: “Quality shared is fine and high moral sort of value, but there’s always a consequence”. By sharing too much schools can weaken themselves and thereby damage their own students. Paul feels that partnerships become concerned to protect the interests of the institutions and they forget the interests of the students: they become morally impotent. “It was about schools and headteachers in schools thinking ‘Well, how will this affect my institution?’ . . . and that’s very different from ‘Is this in the interest of the pupils?’”

### Conclusions on the benefits and drawbacks of partnership

The practical benefits of the Northborough partnerships have been considerable, especially in terms of breadth of opportunity, student engagement, progression, inclusion and quality. These benefits have been achieved through the collective combination of intellectual, practical, social and moral power. The driving force, for me, has been the moral power: the shared commitment to achieve the best for all the children of Northborough, and the commitment to provide moral and practical support for colleagues under the onslaught of government changes. Despite competition, this has led colleagues to seize opportunities to work together and to pool social and practical resources. There is a striking unanimity amongst my interviewees about this moral purpose. Set against these many benefits there are some drawbacks, though Mark says, “the drawbacks for me are minimal, and tend to be logistical – just problems to sort out – rather than anything fundamental or philosophical”. Paul sees the drawbacks as more fundamental. He feels that the sheer scale of the partnerships led to an obsession with process, and a creative inertia. Furthermore, he feels the institutional needs of the partnerships came to undermine their moral purpose and to create a moral impotence. My own feelings are close to Mark’s but I am forced to concede that there is a worrying amount of truth in Paul’s criticisms.

### 3) What makes a partnership succeed or fail?

From my grounded theory analysis I was able to sum up what makes partnerships succeed or fail as a fairly simple 'formula'. I reviewed this 'formula' by comparing my conclusions with guidance given by three writers, Hill (2008), who sets out key lessons from the private sector; Fullan (2005) who gives guidance in an international context; and Hargreaves (2011). I then made additions to my 'formula', which are shown in italics.

#### **'Formula' for successful collaborative partnerships**

A successful collaborative partnership depends on (a) a shared commitment to a clear common purpose. Such commitment depends on (b) shared values and moral purpose. The commitment is secured primarily by (c) leadership qualities of vision and integrity, but it is also secured by (d) good systems of finance, logistics, governance *and intelligent accountability*.

*Commitment needs constantly to be renewed by (e) building capacity through distributed leadership, professional development and disciplined innovation.*

But nothing about life or relationships can really be reduced to a formula. My 'formula' needs to be seen alongside contextual factors. None of the guidance given by Hill (2008), Fullan (2005) or Hargreaves (2011) takes adequate account of these contextual factors.

#### **Contextual factors**

Collaborative partnerships can be supported and promoted by external bodies such as (f) local authorities or (g) central government.

Collaborative partnerships can be undermined by (h) competition, insularity and performativity. However the greatest threats come from (i) changing priorities, which can arise both from changed personnel and from the ever-changing policy framework, especially for the curriculum.

## The 'formula'

### *(a) a shared commitment to a clear common purpose*

Interviewees are very clear about the importance of shared commitment and a clear common purpose. Peter says, "I think it's about the understanding, the passion, the commitment". Robert says, "You've got to have a common issue or common goal", and Neville says, "You can try to put together a group of people or a set of meetings but if they don't have a common purpose it doesn't last very long, does it?"

### *(b) shared values and moral purpose*

Such shared commitment and common purpose depends upon having shared values. The strongest shared value is in the shared moral purpose of benefiting the children of the city. Mark sums this up: "we live in Northborough, and these are the children of Northborough, and we're trying to make Northborough a better place for the future." A key aspect of this shared moral purpose is a shared commitment to inclusion. Sandra wants to ensure that "every aspect of the child or young person within your care has the opportunity to succeed". Paul wants partnerships to "offer opportunities and remedies for the more challenging pupils". Mark praises the vocational partnership for the "confidence and self-esteem that it brought to a really wide variety of children". Another value is that of community. Neville says that "the core of the college is about the local community", and he says that the college focuses on "preparing young people or adults with the skills that Northborough businesses would be looking for". Bethany speaks of the importance of "retaining young people within Northborough".

In order for the partnership to work effectively schools need to be willing to share and to act unselfishly. Peter states this directly: "I think what really makes it successful is the fact that the people must be unselfish". Jack describes this as "A willingness to understand that you will not always benefit from everything that you put into a partnership. A willingness to share."

One education tried to set clear moral values through a memorandum of principles; disastrously, however, the partnership failed to persuade most schools to sign up to it. My

interviewees are generally in favour of the memorandum. Jack says, "I agreed with the values wholeheartedly." Sandra says, "the principles are spot on. They . . . are what you sign up, to be a teacher and a headteacher." Bethany echoes this idea that these are bread-and-butter principles that every teacher should subscribe to; she says, "It was about champions for children, it was about inclusivity, it was about all schools being good. I don't think you could disagree with principles that were in there." Mark, who drafted the principles, said with sadness, "I would still stand by those values, but how you sell that to such a wide and diverse group of people? I don't know. I couldn't." Bethany says "I think in the end there were only maybe half of schools signed up to them, but that was a fear of signing up to anything in those days." Personally, I think they were both being over-generous, and I remain angry at what I see as the craven failure of fellow heads to subscribe to basic moral principles that should be guiding us all: "The best lack all conviction" (Yeats, 1994).

*(c) leadership qualities: vision and integrity*

Interviewees see leadership qualities as being very important in securing partnerships. The key qualities they identified were vision and integrity.

*Vision*

Mark states the importance of the clear vision: "I think the first thing has to be the vision. What is it for? Do we have a clear commonly held understanding of what it is that we're doing?" and he goes on to show how returning to that vision keeps leaders in touch with their moral purpose: "'Can we just remind ourselves why we're doing this. What are we in this for? How . . . is it going to make better opportunity and lives for kids?' As soon as you got back to that, you almost pressed a moral purpose button." Neville says that partnerships fail when they have "no shared vision", and Peter agrees that partnerships break down when they lose their clarity of purpose.

A principal reason for the failure of the whole-authority partnership in Northborough was a failure to establish a clear vision. Sandra uses the image of panic on a sinking ship: "we're on Titanic; we've got people jumping off that way, people jumping off that way, somebody

trying to steer us away from an iceberg, but nobody knows where the iceberg is because nobody's got the map". With this confusion and inconsistency, the project had no hope.

### *Integrity*

My interviewees speak of "trust", "transparency", "honesty" and "openness", all of which I have brought together as aspects of integrity. For Jack, trust is the foremost quality: "First of all, trust." For Bethany it is "Trust and transparency." Neville highlights openness and honesty: "once you've lost openness and honesty then everybody starts to close up, then a partnership quickly starts to disintegrate." In the example of the sixth form partnership, trust was obtained by involving and engaging all partners. However, Robert feels that the partnership became less open over the years and the schools were less engaged; now, he regrets, "I don't think my voice makes any difference."

Maintaining openness and trust can be problematic. Robert praises the openness of the vocational partnership: "A group, a small, tight-knit group also, kept it going. There was a commitment to it. And I didn't feel our meetings were hierarchical. Because we made them open." But for others that small tight-knit group excluded them and undermined their commitment. Paul says "The major drawback was the buy-in from other schools. Other heads etcetera. It became, and this is not to be in any way critical of Robert and Richard, because, you know, good for them, but it did become the Robert and Richard show." As one of "Robert and Richard" I recognise what Paul says and remember our frustration at being unable to engage other heads with decisions we were taking on their behalf.

### *(d) systems: finance, logistics, governance and intelligent accountability*

The success of any partnership depends on having efficient funding, organisational and logistic arrangements to enable it to function smoothly from day to day. However, as well as this, it needs secure arrangements for governance, so that expectations and procedures are clear if things go wrong or circumstances change, and it needs an efficient and effective way of measuring its own progress.

### *Finance*

Finance can sometimes be a determining factor in creating partnerships. Speaking of the whole-authority partnership, Bethany observes, “if you remember when we suggested that each school might want to put money into it, they headed for the hills.” Finance is of particular concern because of the pressures of austerity. Jack says that finance and staffing are “hugely challenging in a falling rolls situation.” Having a partnership can create economies. Peter speaks of “creating opportunities to share facilities, to share staffing, to share training and development and practice” and he says “with a partnership of schools you have got more buying power”. However, in a time of austerity, “in order to thrive and survive some of the things that you valued [are] difficult to maintain” (Robert). Bracco and Callan (2002, p. 19) describe the paradox whereby austerity creates the need for more collaboration, but institutions under financial pressure focus instead on self-preservation.

Money was significant in setting up the collaborative sixth forms because the services of key staff in school were paid for by the partnership. Each head was paid an emolument as an associate principal, and each school had a transition tutor, paid for by the college, who had a role both in the school and in the relevant centre. This meant that there were always two people working in each school on behalf of the partnership, one at a strategic level and the other at a day-to-day practical level. Money was a major factor in setting up the vocational partnership; however, Robert notes the importance of making any project self-sufficient, and one of the reasons that the vocational partnership collapsed was that “it was built on funny money”. Finance is of particular importance as schools become academies and are seen more as businesses.

### *Logistics*

Both the sixth form centres and the vocational partnership were logistically successful, though they faced ongoing challenges. Jack praises the organisational success of the sixth form centres, but accepts that “geography and transport is always a problem” and that “we did spread things too thinly, and have too many centres.” The vocational partnership had to face the logistical challenge of different routines and expectations in the seventeen schools in the partnership. Peter says: “a big challenging thing was the students’ expectations in terms of levels of behaviour, uniform, all those, the day to day things, because you’ve got

seventeen different sets of expectations.” However, as Robert observes, “the logistics of it by and large worked”. A greater logistical challenge was over staffing. Initially there were staff seconded from the schools, but because they only worked at the centres one or two days a week they could never be fully integrated. Specialist staff – for example trained bricklayers – seconded from the college, had a tendency to disappear at a moment’s notice to take up a job in the trade. The partnership therefore took the calculated risk of employing its own staff. This calculated risk turned into a severe liability when the centres had to be closed, because there were then a large number of staff who had to be made redundant.

#### *Governance and intelligent accountability*

Paul argues straightforwardly for strong governance: “clear accountability and in particular clear lines, hierarchy, for want of a better word.” This echoes the conclusions of the House of Commons Education Committee (2013, p. 19). Peter is very clear that strong governance is essential. He says: “as times move on and things change, then unless there is a signed up commitment and an accountability to that commitment, then that’s when the partnership can break up”. Jack highlights the care that was taken in setting up governance for the sixth form centres, and sees this as a strength. However, changing circumstances have made even this structure vulnerable, and Neville expresses the need for something even more formal: “I don’t know how much longer we will be able to hold it together. Without something more formal.”

Intelligent accountability is a feature highlighted by Fullan (2005) and by Hargreaves (2011), who speaks of the importance of evaluation and challenge. Though both the sixth form centres and the vocational partnership made very good use of evaluation and challenge, this was not a feature highlighted by my interviewees when they were explaining what makes partnerships succeed or fail, and this is a weakness in my grounded theory analysis.

#### *(e) building capacity*

Hargreaves (2011) and Fullan (2005) place a very strong focus on building capacity. This was not a theme which emerged strongly in my interviews; I suspect this is because my ‘formula’ is drawn from an embattled group of school leaders at a time of crisis and focuses on the

struggle for survival. However, this is a weakness in my grounded theory analysis. In practice building capacity was included in two of the Northborough partnerships, but not to a sufficient extent. There was good joint training and development at the start of the 6<sup>th</sup> form partnership, but plans to establish joint training between the schools and the college on a systematic annual basis were never adequately followed through. The vocational partnership was exemplary in the way that it established diploma training at the start of the national diplomas, and in the way that schools collaborated together to write and develop the diploma courses. However, once it became established, the partnership was perhaps too self-sufficient and did not need to go on developing courses with the schools and the college because it had its own dedicated staff. The whole-authority partnership was never sufficiently developed for building capacity to be an issue.

### Contextual factors

#### *(f) local authority support*

Whereas the local authority used to have the power to support and promote partnership, that power has now been lost. Neville says “they have lost some of their purpose”. The local authority played a key role in setting up the sixth form partnership and Northborough Futures. However, when it came to one.education the local authority failed. Mark laments the “sudden lack of power” in the authority and himself (mis)quotes Yeats (1994) to say “the centre could not hold”. Interviewees are not sorry to lose the old “surrogate parent” (Sandra) or “patriarchal” (Mark) role, but they have a lot of praise for the support that the local authority has given over the years. Jack praises the support the local authority has given to him in brokering partnerships, and describes their diminishing role as “of great concern”. Robert is “really sad at the demise of local authorities . . . through austerity” and praises their role: “the support I’ve had from Northborough, when things have been tough has been superb”.

A key role of the local authority used to be in setting values for the community of schools. Whereas previously the local authority “had a view of schools across the city” (Mark), there is now a vacuum. Bethany says that schools need to have “sensible conversations” about reducing pupil numbers and the appropriate provision of schools, but individual schools may

not be “open to that discussion.” Robert says that “there is emerging a local accountability role”. This local accountability issue is raised by Ball (1993, p. 6) who refers to “the elimination or reduction in influence of intermediate democratic institutions”. Sandra asks the question “will there be the capacity for government, local government, local authorities, to be able to recognise where it’s going wrong, to be able to recognise where somebody needs to step in?”

*(g) government ‘caprice’*

Jack feels that the government is “very negative” to partnerships. He says “despite the government rhetoric around school to school support, in practice, their idea of it seems to be one school takes over another school.” Paul says “We have a government that measures everything that it values. But it doesn’t measure collaboration.” A key concern is with inconsistency. Paul feels that problems with partnerships are largely due to “the vagaries and changeability of government policy”, and he says specifically of the collapse of Northborough Futures “clearly it was a victim of government caprice”. Jack agrees: “Central government is directly responsible for what’s happened.” The government’s power to change the curriculum or success criteria at will is seen as both whimsical and destructive. Robert says: “they can change the formula for success, and by pressing a button you can go from there to there, and from there to there”. Paul indicates that his fears over the government’s power to change the curriculum prevented him developing vocational courses: “we knew that curriculum changes, and with a wave of a pen the secretary of state, you know, so we were playing cautious, we were playing a bit of a waiting game with it.” The government speaks with “passionate intensity” (Yeats, 1994); Robert sums it all up by saying “government policy is frightening.”

*(h) competition, insularity and performativity.*

Competition between schools has been developed since the creation of an education market in 1988 (Ball, 2013, p. 52). Performativity requires schools to organise themselves in response to targets, indicators and evaluations (Ball, 2003, p. 215). Together they have introduced new values which undermine the moral commitment of schools to ‘the common good’ and which drive schools away from partnership into insularity. Bagley (2006, p. 360) quotes Gewirtz (2002) “... the market revolution is not just a change of structure and incentives. It is a transformational process that brings into play a new set of values and a

new moral environment.” In his Reith lectures, Sandel (2009) argues that markets have become detached from fundamental values: “markets are not mere mechanisms. They embody certain norms. They presuppose, and also promote, certain ways of valuing the goods being exchanged.” Ball (2003, p. 218) argues that “A new basis for ethical decision-making and moral judgement is erected by the ‘incentives’ of performance”. Park (2013, p. 21) states forcefully that performativity is “toxic to the life chances of children and young people”.

### *Competition*

My interviewees are ambivalent about competition and partnerships. Neville says that “in its place I think the free market is all well and good” but he suggests that that place is not “in terms of education of young people”. Bethany distinguishes between “healthy competition” and what she calls “the fundamentals about why you’re there and the moral purpose.” For Mark competition needs to be kept firmly in its place: “this is a moral argument for heads. ‘Do I win by getting the best results for my school or do I win by being better than you and crowing about it?’” Paul states clearly that schools should not be isolated and competing, but that they should be serving a broader purpose: “schools should not be working like a series of Italian Renaissance city states; . . . We should all be serving a broader purpose.” Despite that strong commitment to a broader purpose he recognises that “too often it’s trumped by the pressure that you’re under for self-preservation and survival.” Robert regrettably faces the reality that schools have to put their own interests before the needs of the whole community. He says that the competition for school places means that “in order to be successful it has to be at the expense of somebody else. Which is reality.” He goes on to say that his school could not afford to assist another school if that assistance confirmed the other school as a competitor.

Paul feels that the local authority ought to have focused on setting parameters for competition rather than on promoting partnerships. He says “what we need to do is, we need to say competition is real. Get over it. This is what’s acceptable, and this is what isn’t.” One area that Paul sees as unacceptable is where schools waste money to compete: “It irks me that schools are spending huge amounts of money on advertising. This is money that

should be spent educating pupils.” Another area is where competition leads to schools avoiding taking challenging students.

### *Insularity*

Competition puts pressure on trust and relationships. Jack says “there has to be a willingness to share, and when there is a competitive situation then that’s difficult isn’t it, it’s challenging.” Throughout the interviews the interviewees express a sense of regret that partnerships and relationships are collapsing around them: “Things fall apart” (Yeats, 1994). In some cases this is at a personal level. Jack complains of “a whittling away of trust”. Robert says “There was a time when you and I knew them all, all the heads as colleagues, from all the schools . . . I don’t know what they’re doing now. I don’t know how they impact on me.” Mark argues that the market philosophy behind free schools and academies leads to insularity, and Paul echoes this, saying “there’s a serious danger of what you might term Balkanisation, across secondary schools in Northborough.” Robert asks whether new leaders have the same values: “is there enough recognition by new young leaders of the value of partnerships? Who are being brought up in a very, very, very, very insular world.”

### *Performativity*

Paul gives a clear description of how performativity determines school behaviour by determining outcomes. He says “we have a situation where government, in the form of Ofsted or whatever, don’t tell us what to do: they tell us what we are to achieve”. He also expresses how performativity is at the heart of the government’s values: “We have a government that measures everything that it values.” Sandra expresses her fears about the culture of performativity and the ever increasing demands which she feels are not related to her school and her students: “The ceremony of innocence is drowned” (Yeats, 1994). Her sense of despair comes through when she says that “one day the wheel will come off.” Robert also feels that performativity impacts on morale: “applying a formula to outcomes rigidly will have an impact on the morale of the teaching profession”. These views of performativity contrast sharply with the government’s white paper, which aimed to “combine high levels of autonomy for teachers and schools with high levels of accountability: so that professionals . . . feel highly trusted to do what they believe is right”

(DFE, 2010, p. 18). Far from making her feel trusted, the accountability makes Sandra feel undervalued and misunderstood. Park (2013, p. 14) argues that the current accountability system “assumes a lack of trust and does nothing to build it.”

### *(i) changing priorities*

Some of the greatest threats to partnerships come from changing priorities, which can arise both from changed personnel and from the ever-changing policy framework, especially for the curriculum.

#### *Changed personnel*

Changes of personnel can have a major impact. Neville says of the sixth form partnership “some headteachers or principals have changed and the nature of the partnership that we’ve got has changed.” For example, one headteacher never missed a meeting, but her replacement as head never came to a single meeting, so the whole commitment of that school was lost. Paul states that, “in terms of the Northborough Futures arrangement, I wasn’t there when they were set up. I never had any ownership of this.” As a result, his school never fully engaged.

#### *The ever-changing policy framework*

However, the most dramatic changes have come from government policy. Robert gives a vivid and evocative account of a train journey: “I went to Loughborough to a meeting once... and every station I went to on that country line had a great big poster about diplomas. Every. You go to Derby, you go to Wakefield, they were there; York. I kept looking out the window thinking God, there’re millions in this, we’re on our way! But as people struggled to provide it, they started to water it down, and then overnight, mid-course, stopped.” That sudden change meant that, almost overnight, Northborough Futures moved from being a thriving and successful partnership to being an expensive liability.

## **Conclusion on what makes a partnership succeed or fail**

I have developed a ‘formula’ for successful collaborative partnership, which highlights the key factors. My ‘formula’ is broadly in line with the conclusions of other writers, such as Hill (2008), Hargreaves (2011) and Fullan (2005). However, no ‘formula’ can fully explain the

complexity of context. The contextual factors in relation to Northborough, at the particular period I describe, have been primarily destructive. The context in other parts of the kingdom and in other parts of the world and at other times may well be more positive. Nevertheless, many heads across England will recognise my characterisation of the context in terms of the whirlwind of change, the distorted values of the market and performativity and the caprice of government. My 'formula' has a low level of predictability because of the overwhelming importance of context. However, I suggest that this applies to *any* framework or formula in times of such uncertainty. My 'formula' accepts and highlights that limitation; the other frameworks fail to recognise it and are less convincing because of that.

## **So, how viable are collaborative partnerships in the competitive environment of England's education system?**

Evidence given to the House of Commons Education Committee (2013) indicates that some local authorities such as York, Devon and Wigan have been successful in creating collaborative self-supporting partnerships. I am pleased and encouraged by that success. Hill et al. (2014) describes Lincolnshire's success in promoting partnership working in small rural primary schools. I had thought that Northborough, with its strong tradition of partnerships would be able to do the same; I was wrong. Two of my three partnerships collapsed, and the third is struggling. Northborough is breaking up haphazardly into competing interest groups, and the opportunity has been lost.

Not everything is as negative as this account suggests. One of my interviewees, Sandra, was closely involved in the one.education process, and was deeply frustrated by its failure. She has taken on the ideas and values of one.education in a very innovative and effective manner, though on a very small scale. Her school works in partnership with four other primary schools, using a written set of principles, closely based on the draft principles that one.education failed to establish. The schools remain independent, but the depth of their commitment is clear in the protocol. Sandra is also involved in a 'buddy' partnership with the head from a contrasting school. Her own school is in an extremely deprived part of Northborough; her buddy is head of a school in an advantaged part of Northborough; both heads recognise that they can learn from each other. Neither of these partnerships arose directly from one.education, but they both take on its values and show possible ways forward.

The idea of the self-improving system has been taken up enthusiastically by the headteachers' union, the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL). In the months leading up to the recent general election in 2015 they wrote a 'Blueprint for a self-improving system' with the intention of influencing whatever government was elected. They argue (Cruddas, 2015a, p. 12) for "*a move away from prescription to a profession-led system that is evidence-informed, innovative and ethical*". They argue for "*a renewed focus on the moral imperative of teaching*" to create a fair society and the common good (Cruddas, 2015b, p.

6). In the document they urge school leaders to develop teachers who are “*agents of their own accountability*” and free from “*unnecessary fear, uncertainty and doubt*” (Cruddas, 2015b, p. 17). The ideas of the blueprint, with its clear focus on ethical, professional and social values and its rejection of the values of the market, of performativity and of ideological prescriptions, are refreshing; however, there is no sign that they have had any influence on the new (Conservative) government.

I am ever an optimist. I believe that determined headteachers who are committed to the “*moral imperative of teaching*” and aware of the distorted values of the market and performativity can work together in small-scale collaborative partnerships to benefit the children of their areas. But in a time of “*mere anarchy*” (Yeats, 1994), in the face of rapid and continuous change, rampant competition, high stakes testing and government caprice they will have a very tough time of it.

Richard Bain June 2016

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