Professional development and the teaching schools experiment in England: Leadership challenges in an alliance’s first year

Simon Dowling, EdD student, University of Cambridge

Abstract
This article reports findings from the first year of a longitudinal, mixed-methods case study of a large Teaching School Alliance in England. This national initiative is intended to drive improvement at system level by grouping schools around formally-designated Teaching Schools. These ‘alliances’ work collaboratively to share learning, excellent practice and innovative ideas, principally in teacher education and development. Focused on the influence of one alliance on continuing professional development, this study identified significant leadership challenges in establishing and promoting the new alliance and its work. The policy aim of system level improvement may be difficult to achieve practically in an environment where teaching staff lack agency in their professional development. It is suggested that school leaders need to ensure wide knowledge among their staffs about professional development activity generated by a new alliance, and to ensure that such activity both meets staff needs and goes beyond existing provision.

Keywords
teaching schools, alliance, collaboration, system level improvement, professional development, leadership
Introduction

Teaching Schools in England are an experiment in system-level leadership for school improvement which is being watched around the world. Launched from 2010 in successive cohorts, Teaching Schools are so designated because they have been officially graded ‘outstanding’ both overall and for leadership and management, and have a track record of working with others to raise standards. They are intended to drive improvement across the education system by forming partnerships or ‘alliances’ with other schools and providers to share learning, excellent practice and innovative ideas, principally in teacher education and development (NCSL, 2011). In this article, I report on the influence during its first year of a relatively large Alliance of 25 secondary (high) schools on the continuing professional development (CPD) of its teaching staff, by which I mean both qualified teachers and also classroom assistants who have regular contact with students. I identify significant challenges in leading the work of the Alliance which are relevant to a wide range of collaborative school improvement programmes in the UK and beyond.

This article presents findings drawn from the first iteration, conducted in 2014, of a sequential, mixed-methods case study. I report on classroom staff’s attitudes to change and development, and on their perceptions of the Alliance and its work in its first year. These data are supported by analysis of the Alliance’s provision of professional development opportunities. I argue that, while a large majority of respondents support change in principle, there is a fundamental gap between aspiration and practice in the CPD domain which presents significant challenges for the group’s leaders. Indications at this early stage of development are that a Teaching School Alliance may struggle to reach serving staff, due partly to their lack of knowledge or understanding of the Alliance’s work; and partly to their continued reliance on CPD practices founded either on within-school opportunities, or on between-schools collaboration which pre-dates the Alliance.

Literature review

Promoting and sustaining change in serving teachers’ professional practices, called ‘continuing professional development’ (CPD) in this article, has proved to be “much more complex than had been anticipated” (Fullan, 2001, p17.) While identifying other school improvement factors related to pupil and parent engagement, curriculum and data, Levin
claims that the most important single support is ongoing training in the context of people’s real work settings (2008). Much recent attention has been paid to how CPD might be made more effective through the formalised sharing and spreading of good practice (Hargreaves, D.H., 2003; Hopkins, 2007; Higham et al., 2009). Co-operative, co-ordinated or collaborative modes of working have indeed become the *sine qua non* of organisational improvement in both the private and the public sectors over the last twenty-five years (Mischen, 2015). Management scientists Huxham and Vangen define ‘collaborative advantage’ as the achievement of “whatever visions you may have by tapping into resources and expertise of others” (2005, p3.) In England, the Teaching Schools programme is designed to take ‘collaborative advantage’ as an institutional goal and apply it to six formal strands of activity, of which CPD is one.

Teaching Schools are a genuine innovation both nationally and internationally because of their formal designation by central authority; their national scope; and their focus on organised collaboration between schools and classroom staffs for improvement of the whole system (Hargreaves, D.H., 2010, 2011; Hill, 2008; Fullan, 2005). However, it is not entirely clear how the initiative is to fit into the complex and divergent English educational landscape, which already features several types of school and of partnership between schools (Husbands, 2015; Simkins, 2015). There has been, to date, a dearth of detailed, critical, empirical research into Teaching Schools (Woods & Simkins, 2014). I seek to help fill that gap by undertaking a longitudinal, mixed-methods case study of a large Teaching School Alliance from its first year of operations (the academic year 2013-14) through its second and third years and beyond. My primary focus is on whether this multi-school collaborative grouping can reach the classroom staff who, policy-makers, school leaders and scholars agree, are the people who really matter in improving outcomes for pupils (Chapman, 2013; Bishop, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2010).

**Methodology**

My research question addresses perceptions of the Alliance’s work amongst teaching staff in its member schools as a means of measuring its influence on their professional development. My theoretical approach is founded on the diffusion of innovations paradigm commonly used in several areas of social science (Rogers, 2003). My overall research design is longitudinal, mixed-methods and iterative, and recognises the constraints imposed by my position as a solo, part-time researcher; it calls for a survey of voluntary
participants in a relatively small number of sample schools on an annual basis for three or possibly four years. The first iteration of the quantitative questionnaire was distributed in January 2014 to all teaching staff (qualified teachers and classroom assistants) in a purposive sample of eight schools drawn from the 25 schools and colleges which had joined the Alliance by that point, selected to be representative of the range of school types and locations in the Alliance. Detailed, follow-up qualitative interviews were carried out with volunteer respondents in June 2014.

**Questionnaire**

The first iteration of the questionnaire focused on teaching staff’s attitudes to and perceptions of the Alliance which their school had joined. It was designed to collect data on (1) demographic factors which may influence the diffusion of innovations, such as the respondent’s gender, qualification level and length of service; and (2) characteristics of the individual respondent and of the school which have been shown by previous research to be relevant to the diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 2003; Hannon, 2011). These included attitudes to change, to collaboration, and to the Teaching School Alliance’s work. A total of 645 questionnaires were distributed and 208 were returned fully or partially completed, giving an overall response rate of 32%.

**Interviews**

For reasons of time and resources, I chose the structured interview format, and decided to combine in one interview, designed to last about 30 minutes, the purposes of (1) following up issues raised by questionnaire responses; and (2) collecting qualitative data about facilitators and barriers to the spreading of effective practice.

**Analysis of Alliance activity data**

To inform inferences drawn from the questionnaire and interview responses, I also investigated data on the incidence of and participation in professional development activities generated by the Alliance in its first year.

**Findings and discussion**

Factor analysis of questionnaire responses using varimax rotation confirmed the factorial structure of the data as shown in Table 1 below. Analysis of the data was carried out on a
factor by factor basis and is reported as such in the following sub-sections. Issues raised by questionnaire responses were followed up in interviews.

Insert Table 1

Factor 1: School-level support for change

Environment is widely accepted to be a crucial element in promoting change. A large majority of respondents to this survey (85.2% of valid responses) felt that, in terms of professional environment, their schools encourage and support teaching staff professional development ‘quite a lot’ or ‘very much’. The effectiveness of such development was scored lower with 73.3% rating it as quite or very effective. Similarly, the level of school support for teaching staff collaboration was rated quite or very high by 77.2% and the effectiveness of collaboration was rated quite or very high by 67.2%. In this last case and unlike the three preceding questions, more respondents rated it ‘neutral’ (score = 3) than rated it ‘very much’ (score = 5). There thus appears to be a gap, though not a large one, between policy and practice in the experience of a significant minority of teaching staff in all eight schools being studied: the relatively strong perception of being supported in professional development and collaboration is not entirely matched by practical outcomes. Reasons which might explain this observation emerged during follow-up interviews.

Interview responses suggested that, in at least four of the schools in the sample of eight, the focus of collaboration for development is the subject area or (in special schools) the small team. Interviewees reported comparatively frequent sharing of planning and assessment, peer observations, lesson study and coaching activities with colleagues teaching the same subject in their own school. This was said to be particularly so among recently-trained staff, who carry over into their early careers the trainee’s habits of collaborative practice, reflection and action for improvement. Collaboration between subject areas in the same school (for example, via peer observations) was said to be comparatively rare. Collaboration between schools occurred where schools were in a formal relationship, such as a federation or an improvement partnership. Several interviewees reported that, both within their own school and in between-schools activities, the content and form of professional development was largely or entirely determined by school leaders, usually in response to the school development plan, which was itself a response to the school’s most recent official inspection judgement. This ‘hierarchical’ or
‘top down’ approach to CPD has a bearing on the issue of an individual’s agency in achieving change which is discussed in the following sub-section.

Factors 2 and 3: Teaching staff attitudes to importance and to frequency of change
A second crucial element in promoting change is individual disposition. Teaching staff’s attitudes to professional development as reported in this survey demonstrated a gap between aspiration and reality similar to that found in school-level support for change (Factor 1). The importance of improving professional practice was rated quite or very highly in 95.5% of valid responses and the importance of undertaking continuing professional development (CPD) was close behind with 94.5%. However, the score for the frequency of engagement in CPD was lower: 77.7% of respondents rated their activity as ‘quite a lot’ (the mode for this question) or ‘very much’. So it could be deduced that nearly 20% of all respondents do not engage in CPD as often as they feel they should.

The issue of teacher agency (making one’s own choices) in pursuing professional development is revealed as problematic in this survey. A total of 81.7% of valid responses rated agency as quite or very important, but only 60.8% reported initiating their own development quite or very often and more respondents rated frequency of agency as ‘neutral’ (score = 3) than rated it ‘very often’ (score = 5.) However, respondents reported a relatively high frequency of reflexive thinking. The picture is complicated by relatively low reliability when questions grouped under this factor are taken together: those which address importance of change have a moderate Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.548. This figure improves to 0.745 when the question about the importance of teacher agency is omitted. Questions which address frequency of change activity have a moderate Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.594; no variable omitted produces a significant improvement in reliability, and the omission of the question about frequency of teacher agency produces yet lower figures (unlike the questions dealing with importance.)

A working hypothesis to explain this phenomenon is that a significant number of respondents had not considered the meaning and implications of agency when it came to their professional development. This theory might be supported by bivariate correlation analyses between the variables grouped under this factor: there is hardly any correlation between reported attitudes to the importance of improving practice and the importance of
teacher agency, nor between the importance of CPD and the importance of teacher agency. Correlations are only weakly positive between importance and frequency of agency; and between frequency of agency and frequency of reflexivity.

Interview responses confirmed that a key influence on teaching staff perceptions of their agency is the prevalence of imposed, school-determined CPD, most often driven by the requirements of the school development plan. Every interviewee mentioned this as the most common experience of professional development activity. Individuals who search out their own development opportunities beyond those provided at school level were reported as being comparatively rare, and were thought of as being among the “best practitioners” (‘Melanie’, a senior leader). Most interviewees did not count themselves among this group; the reason most often given for not undertaking self-determined CPD was lack of time. The question of whether the work of the new Alliance could affect this attitude was addressed under Factor 4.

**Factor 4: Teaching staff attitudes to Teaching School Alliance**

Knowledge of the Alliance and its aims among the teaching staff of its member schools appeared to be relatively thin: 24.9% of valid responses rated understanding of the aims of the Alliance as quite or very high and 27.9% were neutral. Support for the Alliance was a little higher with 30.6% scoring it as quite or very high and 46.8% as neutral. Understanding of the benefits of Alliance membership to schools, to pupils and to teachers professionally was equally uncommitted: 41.2%, 44.7% and 43.7% respectively scored these variables as ‘neutral’, and the percentages scoring them as ‘very high’ were tiny (5.2%, 2.5% and 3.6% respectively.) Willingness to engage in Alliance activities was largely non-committal.

In the first year of the Alliance’s life, when few teachers seemed to have witnessed activities which could be said to be generated by the Alliance, it is not surprising that so many were sitting on the fence. This deduction is supported by interview evidence which uniformly suggested that classroom teaching staff had been given no introduction to or explanation of the form and functions of the Teaching School Alliance to which their schools had signed up. One interviewee asked at the end of the interview, “What is a teaching school alliance?” In terms of diffusion of innovations theory, this aspect of perception could be conceptualised as ‘reach’, that is, the proportion of the target audience
that is aware of the innovation. The results of the first iteration of the survey suggested that the Alliance’s ‘reach’ in general terms was small in Year One, and this was echoed when respondents were asked about details of the Alliance’s work.

**Factor 5: Teaching staff perception of the six strands of Teaching School Alliance activity**

The importance to teachers of the six formal strands of Alliance work varied from strand to strand. Given the importance of professional development in the minds of many respondents (Factor 2), it is not surprising to find that CPD was the highest-rated strand with 76.3% of valid responses scoring it as quite or very important. Next came initial teacher training (ITT) with 72.6%; then school-to-school support (S2S) with 66.1% and leadership development and succession planning (LSP) with 63.0%; while the remaining two strands followed some way behind, with research and development (R&D) on 58.4% and development and deployment of formally designated ‘specialist leaders of education’ (SLEs) on 55.6%.

Given that this Alliance chose to prioritise ITT and CPD in its first year, in common with other alliances across the country, it is clear that these strands were likely to make the most impression on teachers. The SLEs strand was delayed until the Alliance’s second year, while R&D seems to be suffering the perennial fate of educational research in struggling to find an audience among working teachers. This last deduction is supported by interview evidence which suggests that classroom staff perceived a gap between the “theoretical" perspective of academic educational research and the “practical" day-to-day challenges that staff would welcome help in dealing with (‘Clark’, a mid-career teacher). Indeed, an ‘R&D Fayre’ held in the Summer Term of 2014 attracted very few classroom teaching staff, and all those who attended worked at the host school.

Regarding CPD, an observation made by ‘Melanie’ was that the Alliance would need to provide things which individual schools or pre-existing partnerships could not provide, such as leadership preparation courses, if it were to be considered valuable by senior leaders. However, ‘Julia’, a middle leader, noted that such courses had already been set up by a pre-existing federation and that the original bid for Teaching School designation “had been founded on things that were already running.” By far the best attended CPD events in Year One were indeed the leadership preparation courses run by an external provider. Two subject-based events were run: Computing for primary (elementary) school staff was
well-attended and Drama for secondary (high) school staff less so. Secondary History did not take place due to lack of bookings. There seemed to be some scepticism among respondents that the Alliance could bring anything new to the table. In terms of diffusion of innovations theory, this aspect of the innovation could be conceptualised as 'significance', that is, the perceived benefit to the adopter of the innovation. Evidence gathered by this survey suggests that the Alliance’s ‘significance’ in its first year was low. This finding could in part be explained by an additional factor which emerged during the interview phase.

*An additional factor: pre-existing school partnerships*
An unexpected factor which emerged in interview was the persistent influence of inter-school partnerships which pre-date the Teaching School Alliance. When talking with colleagues about collaboration between schools, most interviewees reported basing their discussions on their knowledge of either a formal federation (where two or more schools operate under the same executive principal and governing body), or a multi-school improvement partnership (where schools choose to work together towards certain common goals), to which their schools belonged before also joining the Teaching School Alliance. Indeed, when trying to identify examples of effective collaboration between schools, interviewees reported uniformly that they and their colleagues credited those other partnerships. Only one interviewee (‘David’, a subject leader) credited the Alliance with originating a professional development activity, to which he had himself contributed as a subject specialist. The profile among staff social networks achieved by the Alliance in its first year could thus be said to be sub-optimal, a result both of leaders’ inattention to promoting the innovation (Factor 4), and of the persistent influence of other collaborative working arrangements.

**Conclusions**
A perhaps predictable gap between aspiration and practical reality in terms of professional development was revealed by this survey of an Alliance’s first year. Staff working in classrooms mostly felt that their schools support change and they saw their own development as important, but they were not as active in pursuing their own development as their perceptions of it would suggest. Agency (making one’s own choices) was a problematic concept in this regard. Collaboration (joint enterprise towards a shared goal)
between classroom staff was also an area where aspiration and practice diverged for some respondents. Professional development activity was reported as often being determined by school leaders in response to the school development plan. This appeared to be a manifestation of the still-dominant model of hierarchical, top-down transmission of information to a more or less willing audience. Previous research has suggested that this model has little currency among teachers and does not often lead to substantial or sustained changes in practice because of its isolation from the daily realities of school life (Fielding et al., 2005). Respondents to this survey mostly did not feel that they had the opportunity to undertake focused, learner-centred, reflexive development activity in a manner which would lead to genuinely collaborative ‘joint practice development’ or JPD (Hargreaves, D.H. 2011; Matthews & Berwick, 2013). This finding is mirrored in other countries which took part in the TALIS 2008 survey (Vieluf et al., 2012), which found in every participating country a relatively small group of teachers who reported a strong disposition in favour of individual innovation.

Respondents did not appear to be convinced in Year One that a Teaching School Alliance would help them in their own development. Perceptions of the aims and benefits of an Alliance’s work were reported as neutral, due mainly to lack of knowledge about it. Other inter-school partnerships which pre-date the Alliance were thought to be more important. Perceptions of the six formal strands of Alliance activity were reported as relatively supportive although, given the caution expressed above, this may be in the abstract rather than in practical terms. Indeed, direct knowledge of and participation in Alliance-generated activities was reported as minimal, with the exception of professional development activities which could not be found elsewhere, such as leadership preparation courses which individual schools could not run themselves.

If a new multi-school improvement group is to have influence on the professional lives of staff in its member schools, then I suggest that its leaders must work hard to mobilise system-level, collaborative CPD activity that goes beyond existing provision. A key goal should be to increase the ‘significance’ of the Teaching School Alliance, that is, to make what it offers attractive to the majority of classroom staff in each member school. If this goal is not achieved, then the ‘reach’ of the Teaching Schools innovation will be confined to the relatively few ‘early adopters’ who have a specific development focus which cannot be met under other within-school or between-schools arrangements. The policy aspiration for a ‘self-improving school system’ would, in such circumstances, be unlikely to become a
reality in practice. The leadership challenge in establishing the \textit{bona fides} of a new collaborative school improvement programme, as exemplified in the Teaching Schools experiment in England, is substantial and is wide-reaching in its applicability to similar programmes around the world.

\textbf{References}


Table 1. Factorial structure of questionnaire variables which use a Likert scale.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Cronbach's Alpha</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>School-level support for change</td>
<td>0.839</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.626</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>94.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Teachers’ attitude to change: importance of change</td>
<td>0.745</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.533</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>95.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Teachers’ attitude to change: frequency of change</td>
<td>0.594</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.717</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>92.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Teachers’ attitude to Alliance</td>
<td>0.936</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.934</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>89.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Teachers’ perceptions of Big 6 strands</td>
<td>0.942</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.841</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>89.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N.B. One question on teacher agency was excluded from the factorial structure due to its low reliability. It was followed up via qualitative interviews.