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Deposited on 27 February 2020
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<th>School Effectiveness and School Improvement</th>
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<td>NSES-2017-0149.R2</td>
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<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
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<td>Keywords:</td>
<td>Educational improvement, System leadership, Educational reform, School to school support</td>
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URL: http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/nses  Email: c.m.a.lenderink@rug.nl
School-to-school support within a competitive education system: views from the inside

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(Received 15 August 2017; accepted 10 July 2018)

This paper draws on evidence from a study carried out in England to explore how schools can support one another’s improvement within a policy context that emphasises competition. The findings offer some reasons to be optimistic, and are suggestive of the capacity and potential of the school system in England to “self-improve” through collaborative means. However, light is also thrown on a number of barriers that need to be overcome to make such an approach work. The paper argues that developing a greater understanding of the social complexities involved in school-to-school support requires research that takes account of the views of those involved. With this in mind, the paper reflects on the experiences of a group of school leaders in England, leading to lessons that are likely to be relevant to those in other national contexts where competition is seen as a driver for school improvement.

Keywords: School-to-school support; system leadership; educational improvement; educational reform

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Introduction

In his introduction to a special edition of this journal, Muijs (2010) refers to the potential of networking and collaboration as a way of improving schools in relation to both standards and equity. Since then, we have seen developments in many countries that further emphasise competition between schools as the way forward, a trend that hardly seems conducive to schools working together. In this paper, we explore this matter in the context of England, a country where national policy has been subject to radical reforms that involve the use of market forces to intensify efforts to improve standards.

Central to the English reforms is a greater emphasis on schools becoming more autonomous, taking responsibility for their own improvement. At the same time, it is envisaged that schools will increasingly turn to each other for support in moving forward. At present, there are many views as to whether all of this is having the desired effect and, of course, it is still early days as far as determining the impact on student outcomes. There are also increasing concerns that the reforms are leading to fragmentation within the education system that runs the risk of further disadvantaging learners from economically poorer backgrounds. There is, therefore, a need to learn from experiences in the field in order to minimise the risks and maximise the potential of the reforms. This necessitates research that draws on the experiences of those who are attempting to put this policy into action.

With this in mind, this paper reflects on the findings of our research into the views of school leaders who are attempting to move the English reform agenda forward. This leads us to throw light on the challenges involved in promoting school-to-school cooperation within a highly competitive education system. At the same time, we draw attention to some promising developments. Reflecting on these experiences, we draw
lessons that could be helpful, both in England and in other national contexts. We begin, however, by setting the context for our research, first of all, in terms of policy developments and then with regard to relevant research literature.

The English policy context

The last 20 years have seen intensive efforts by successive governments to improve the performance of the English education system. Competition between schools is seen to be one of the keys to “driving up standards”, whilst at the same time further reducing the control of local authorities over provision (Whitty, 2010).

More recently, the emphasis on competition has been intensified as increasing numbers of state schools have been encouraged – and, in some instances, required – to become academies. These schools are funded directly by national government, rather than through a local authority. This is intended to liberate schools from the bureaucracy of local government influence and, in so doing, establish a form of market place. In this way, it is intended that families will have greater choice as to which school their youngsters will attend (Adonis, 2012).

As a result of the expanding academies programme, as well as other contributing policies, the education system in England has become increasingly diverse. Furthermore, the introduction of various other types of schools that operate under the academy legislation – such as free schools, based on the Swedish model, studio schools, and university technical colleges – has contributed to the complexity of the scene.

An independent commission set up to review these developments pointed out that the original aim of academies was “to address entrenched failure in schools with low performance, most particularly, schools located in the most disadvantaged parts of
the country” (Husbands, Gilbert, Francis, & Wigdortz, 2013, p. 4). Subsequently, the focus has changed towards increasing the autonomy of all schools. At the same time, there has been a growing emphasis on schools supporting one another, leading to an unusual cocktail of competition and cooperation.

Since the election of the Conservative-led coalition government in 2010, followed by the Conservative government in 2015, all of this has become much more central to education policy in England. The basis of the approach was outlined in a White Paper that set out plans to improve the quality of teachers and school leadership through school-to-school support and peer-to-peer learning (Department for Education [DfE], 2010). Speaking about these plans in June 2011, the then Secretary of State for Education argued that, in order to address the issue of educational underperformance, particular amongst disadvantaged groups of learners, there is a need to develop a “culture of collaboration”. More specifically, he emphasised his intention to develop networks of schools in order to create a “self-improving system” (Gove, 2011).


Central to the strategy that has subsequently evolved is a national network of “teaching schools” (Matthews & Berwick, 2013). Analogous to teaching hospitals, the intention is that these schools will have a key role to play in leading the training and professional development of teachers and school principals. Teaching schools are expected to work together within an alliance: a group of schools and other partners supported by the leadership of the teaching school (Gu et al., 2016).
Earlier research has led us to take a positive view of the thinking that guides these developments, particularly the emphasis they place on school-to-school collaboration (Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick, & West, 2016). However, we suggest there are considerable difficulties facing the implementation of this approach and argue that these difficulties arise from policy contradictions, not least in relation to pressures created by accountability procedures. All of this throws further light on the challenges facing efforts to use school-to-school collaboration to foster improvements within policies that emphasise competition between schools.

Leadership is an important factor in the move towards David Hargreaves’s idea of a self-improving school system. The Government’s response to this has been to create a cadre of what Hopkins (2007) calls “system leaders”. Known as national leaders of education (NLEs), these are successful school leaders who have experience of supporting schools in challenging circumstances (DfE, 2014). The policy suggests that they should work with teaching schools and other system leaders to provide high-quality support to those schools that need it most.

Alongside the development of teaching schools and the introduction of system leaders, there has been a growing trend towards the formation of academy groups, referred to as multi-academy trusts (MATs). Adding further complexities is the fact that some MATs are part of teaching school alliances. As we will show, all of this can lead to tensions within the system, with school leaders left uncertain as to where they should position themselves in relation to the structural changes that are being introduced.

This raises questions regarding the local coordination of the school system and is one of the most worrying aspects of the current policy context, with its emphasis on school autonomy, competition, and new governance structures that can discourage
schools from working with others. A further factor is that recent years have seen a gradual reduction in the power and influence of the local authorities that have traditionally taken on this responsibility.

Meanwhile, in September 2014, eight regional schools commissioners (RSCs) were appointed to oversee the growing numbers of academies in England. Since taking up post, their roles have expanded to include decision making in tackling underperformance in local authority maintained schools. As a result, they have rapidly become an important and powerful feature of the English education system (Durbin, Wespieser, Bernardinelli, & Gee, 2015).

In summary, then, the recent reforms within the English education system can be seen as an attempt to replace what is seen by some policymakers as a failed system. It is argued that this will be achieved by:

- allowing schools greater space to explore new ways of accelerating the progress of their students, freed from the heavy bureaucracy and inefficient management that are seen to have been a feature of public administration;
- putting practitioners in a better position to address the particular needs of their students, due to their increased freedom to make decisions about educational practices;
- increasing parental choice and diversity of local schools, and, as a result, improving overall standards by further intensifying competition between schools; and
- encouraging schools to support one another in making this work, using teaching schools and MATs as a means of coordinating arrangements.
It is worth adding that similar thinking is increasingly guiding policy developments in other countries, most notably in Australia, Sweden, and the USA (Salokangas & Ainscow, 2017). In the meantime, within the English context, the implementation of this approach is leading to uncertainties and tensions, as those involved try to make sense of the complexities involved although, as our findings suggest, it is also leading to some promising developments.

**Schools supporting schools**

There exists a growing body of research evidence that suggests school-to-school collaboration can contribute to improvement by strengthening the capacity of expertise available and facilitating more meaningful responses to learner diversity (see Ainscow, 2015; Chapman & Hadfield, 2010; Fielding et al., 2005; Muijs, Ainscow, Chapman, & West, 2011). At the same time, concern has been expressed by Croft (2015) about what he sees as a lack of “hard” evidence of the impact on student outcomes, since, he argues, the research has been dogged by weak methodology. He goes on to suggest that this leads to findings that are of limited use in relation to what actually makes the difference to pupil progress and attainment.

These sentiments are echoed by Ainscow (2015), who also highlights a lack of evidence relating to how different types of collaborative arrangements might vary in effectiveness, sustainability, and the kinds of impact they make. It has also been noted that there are few studies assessing the ways in which attitudes and practices are evolving on the ground as a result of these radical English policy changes (Greany, 2017). In particular, little is known about how practitioners are reacting to what we referred to earlier as an unusual cocktail of competition and cooperation.
Such critique is not without merit given that the evidence for a tangible connection between school-to-school collaboration and student outcomes is mixed at best. Some studies report no links at all between schools working together and increases in student attainment (Sammons, Mujtaba, Earl, & Gu, 2007; Woods et al., 2006), whereas others point to a possible association (Hutchings, Greenwood, Hollingworth, Mansaray, & Rose, 2012). There are, however, a small number of notable exceptions. For example, Chapman and Muijs (2013, 2014) undertook comparative research with federations of schools and a matched sample of non-federated comparator schools in England. By controlling for a number of factors, the researchers were able to isolate the influence of federation membership and demonstrate that certain types of federation – those where underperforming schools had been partnered with high-performing settings – had a positive impact on student attainment.

In a related study, Muijs (2015) explored the impact on student attainment of partnerships between high- and underperforming schools within the primary sector in England. The findings of a quasi-experimental design to generate a matched sample showed that pupils in partnership schools outperformed their peers in comparator schools, with successful partnerships typified by intensive interventions within the classroom and at leadership level.

Additionally, a growing body of empirical research and theoretical debate is providing much-needed insight into the changing roles of educational stakeholders within the context of a “self-improving school system” in England, and the socio-political forces that shape and influence such activity. For example, Greany (2015) explores the means by which local authorities and school leaders in two areas of England are responding to the structural reforms implied by the push towards a self-improving school system. His findings suggest that, despite an academies programme
that has politically marginalised local authorities, they continue to play a crucial role in
the monitoring, intervention, and support of schools within their locality. Further, in the
examples he provides, reductions in funding have led to local authorities establishing
networks of schools that can support one another through school-led improvement.

Other research paints a similarly positive picture of innovation in respect of new
and emerging collaborative arrangements involving local authorities, schools, and
school leaders (see Aston et al., 2013; Gilbert, 2017; Sandals & Bryant, 2014).
However, Hatcher (2014) offers a more critical view of such developments in his
reflections on a case study of a head teacher-coordinated partnership between schools
and their local authority. He asserts that the collaborative intent underpinning such
arrangements can mask a limited focus on compliance with policy-directed
improvement priorities, at the expense of more developmental and democratic
structures. He goes on to suggest that, while school partnership arrangements can be
potential sites for “school improvement”, development, and radical innovation, the
narrow focus and the “exclusionary membership” of such networks suggest they are
more accurately understood as “closed managerialist networks” that serve as vehicles
for the government performativity agendas (p. 367).

Some key messages emerge from these studies. First, it is clear that local and
regional school systems have been responding to recent structural reforms and policy
shifts in localised and context-specific ways. Second, it is evident that there is a strong
appetite across the school system for collaboration and partnership working amongst
school stakeholders and an understanding of the potential for sharing knowledge,
intelligence, and resources as a means of improvement (Gilbert, 2017; Higham &
Earley, 2013). Finally, it is clear from the evidence base that school-to-school
collaboration is not necessarily a simple strategy that will guarantee progress. Indeed, it
might simply be a fad that goes well when led by skilled and enthusiastic advocates but then fades when spread more widely. Concerns have also been expressed that: school partnerships can lead to lots of non-productive time, as members of staff spend periods out of school; schools involved in working collaboratively may collude with one another to reinforce mediocrity and low expectations; those schools that most need help may choose not to get involved; and some head teachers may become “empire builders”, who deter others from getting involved (Ainscow, 2015; Coldron, Crawford, Jones, & Simkins, 2014; Greany, 2015).

Bearing all of this in mind, in what follows we draw on the views of school leaders who are closely involved in promoting greater cooperation within a national policy context that is increasingly driven by competition between schools. This leads us to pinpoint what seem to be promising developments, as well as barriers to progress. In so doing, we make use of the work of Muijs and Rumyantseva (2014), who have explored how competition and collaboration can sometimes coexist through what they describe as “coopetition”. They note, however, that there are few studies of this approach in the field of education.

Gathering the views of insiders

The evidence we draw on was generated through in-depth focused interviews with a group of stakeholders who were in a position to offer views “from the inside”. These data were selected from a larger United Kingdom government-commissioned evaluation of the School to School Support Fund (StSS) initiative (Armstrong & Ainscow, 2017). This involved funding for which eligible schools applied to support other schools that were underperforming.
Acting as evaluators on behalf of the government gave us privileged access, enabling us to talk with key stakeholders drawn from two regions of the country. These regions included areas where school-to-school support was said by government officials to be at a relatively mature stage and others where this was believed to be less so. In this article, we draw on the ideas of 14 system leaders, seven in each region, all of whom were direct recipients of the StSS funding and therefore responsible for providing support to schools. In addition, we take account of the views of the coordinators of arrangements for school-to-school support in each region, as well as the team of civil servants closely involved in the further development of national policies related to this agenda.

We acknowledge some important limitations associated with the generation of data in this way. First, it is possible that the government-funded nature of the initiative we were tasked with evaluating may have influenced the extent to which interviewees felt able to provide honest responses to the questions posed. In response to this possibility, participants were assured of complete confidentiality and anonymity in their responses, whereby pseudonyms for school names and individuals would be used for dissemination of data from the project (including reporting to the funder). Furthermore, data would be reported and discussed in regional terms to ensure specific locations of schools and individuals could not be identified. It was anticipated that these steps would provide participants with the confidence to talk openly about their experiences of this initiative. We should add that many of the respondents did provide comments that were critical of current national policies, as well as of the local arrangements for implementing these policies.

Second, the system leaders we interviewed were all recipients of the StSS funding, and therefore providers of the support in question. We recognise that this is a
limitation of the data we present: A more comprehensive and balanced perspective of school-to-school support would have included the views and experiences of colleagues on the receiving end of such support. Unfortunately, this was not possible within the parameters of the evaluation we undertook. Nevertheless, we remain confident that the views of the participants we spoke to provided us with meaningful insights into the nuances of school-to-school support within their local and regional contexts.

In carrying out the interviews, we aimed to make the process a useful professional experience for the respondents, all of whom were highly experienced practitioners. At the same time, we intended that the process would encourage the sharing of experiences so as to throw light on the complexities involved in carrying out this challenging work. This was facilitated through an interview protocol that was designed to explore both the functional aspects of the participants’ involvement in the StSS initiative (i.e., how funding was utilised, the nature of the support provided, impact of the support, etc.) and also some of the broader contextual factors that inhibit and enable school-to-school support. This approach allowed us to elicit information that would attend to both the evaluative requirements of the research and also our own broader research interests in the issues we raise within this paper.

With all of this in mind, each interview, although following a common agenda, needed to be flexible and responsive to the accounts and explanations provided by the respondents. Our own extensive knowledge of relevant research was, therefore, vital in helping to focus and push the discussions forward. The interviews concluded with the researcher offering a summary of key ideas that had emerged, a procedure often used in qualitative studies in order to check the credibility of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This proved to be particularly effective, not least in allowing respondents to correct misinterpretations and offer additional thoughts.
Following each interview, the recorded discussions were transcribed and analysed to draw out lessons that could be used to inform policy and practice in the future. Then, at a later date, these texts were reconsidered in relation to the agenda of this paper. In this context, our varied experiences and expertise proved to be particularly useful in providing alternative explanations, as recommended by Wasser and Bresler (1996).

Promising developments

Whilst the data we draw on were generated in response to a specific and focused government initiative, they allow us to think more broadly about the potential and appetite that exists within a highly competitive system for schools to help one another in supporting improvement efforts. In this section, we present what we see as promising developments in respect of this. In particular, we focus on the mobilisation of educational stakeholders and the forms of school-to-school support they have established that provide encouraging signs of system-led improvement.

A key finding in this respect is the emergence of new coordination mechanisms through which arrangements for partnerships can be made. These start within schools, where new organisational arrangements have to be made so that key members of staff can be freed to work offsite. They then require new forms of coordination set up to assess local needs and facilitate relevant partnerships between schools. Inevitably, this sometimes leads to tensions, as those with varying priorities seek to find ways of addressing their differences. Our findings suggest that this problem was being addressed, albeit at a different pace in each context. These differences relate, at least in part, to historical and geographical factors.
So, for example, an inner-city region provides a particularly strong example of maturity. There, stakeholders have created an overarching learning partnership, comprising representatives from local authorities, teaching schools, and the regional schools commissioner. They also have an independent chair. System leaders in the area highlighted the role of this partnership in bringing educational stakeholders together. One school leader commented:

The partnership has worked really hard to ensure every stakeholder is represented. In the space of just two years there has been a massive shift in terms of the people in the room, the messages being communicated and the things we are getting done. They have done a brilliant job to be honest.

As part of its remit to coordinate school-led improvement across the area, the learning partnership plays a central role in screening which schools require support and which are best placed to provide such support. This has been possible because of the willingness of all parties to communicate, and share local intelligence and school-level data. It has created a system that not only identifies schools that are categorised as failing by the nature of their inspection grades and pupil assessment data, but also those that are at risk of falling into such categories. As this head teacher explains:

The new system we have is much better because we can collectively bring local intelligence together about where the system leaders are, where the schools at risk are and who we should be looking at and then the local authority give their rank order in terms of priority.
In addition to the coordination provided by the learning partnership, there is a school improvement group, comprising system leaders, the local authority, and representatives from the teaching schools. It meets every half term to share intelligence regarding schools that are in need of support, as this head teacher describes:

The local authority brings all the data on all the schools, basically everything that schools are held accountable for. We also look at Ofsted recommendations and the local authority’s own quality assurance data from school visits they have undertaken, so all the information is on the table. People then have a bit of time to think about what support they can offer, some sign up there and then and others go back to their schools to discuss capacity and then get in touch but we know we are basing this on all relevant data and information.

These partnership arrangements emerged out of the legacy of a previous national initiative that was characterised by school-to-school collaboration and provides the roots of much of the activity that we see in this area today. As such, it illustrates how previous experiences within a locality can provide a sense of optimism as to what is possible with regards to schools working together. This historical context is important to acknowledge, as it is within these previous experiences of partnership work that schools and other educational stakeholders within this area forged their current relationships, and the mutual trust and willingness to work together that underpin their collaborative activity.

Another example of successful partnership work was found in a rural county. It involves three alliances of system leaders that represent the north, west, and south of the county. They each take responsibility for monitoring all the schools in their areas. This then feeds directly into discussions surrounding the schools that are suitable for school-to-school support, as this head teacher explains:
We sit round the table at the alliance strategy meetings and go through every single school including their strengths and their capacity to support other schools, good practice, case studies, school-level data and any other intelligence … we’ve really tried to push for schools to improve their communication with us and each other and to understand that they need to support each other rather than rely on the local authority for help and then the alliance can broker any additional funding streams where necessary.

The stakeholders across this particular county have worked hard to break down traditional barriers to the sharing of data and intelligence, and have moved towards a culture of knowledge mobilisation. However, there remains room for progress and some schools have yet to engage fully, as this head teacher explains:

Not all schools have signed up to their local alliance but we wouldn’t let a school fail without offering help, regardless of whether they are signed up. It’s that moral imperative.

This example is all the more encouraging because of its rural context. This reminds us that, as far as school-to-school cooperation is concerned, context matters. It suggests, too, that urban localities have an added advantage in that movement between schools tends to be made easier because of shorter distances between schools and greater transport options. There also tend to be much higher numbers of teaching schools in these contexts.

There are, in fact, vast areas of England where there is limited access to support from teaching schools and NLEs. Together, these factors make the development of
school-to-school support arrangements in rural areas more challenging. However, as the system leaders in this particular example have demonstrated, such barriers can be overcome through collective mobilisation of resources, sharing of intelligence, and a willingness of all stakeholders to work together.

These examples highlight the apparent willingness and appetite amongst educational stakeholders to mobilise and pool their resources, expertise, and knowledge as a means of strengthening and improving their regional and local school systems. Interestingly, although the national educational policy landscape has undoubtedly facilitated and in many ways necessitated such partnership work, much of the activity to which we have referred in this section has been school led. Furthermore, common to the examples is the key coordinating role of local authorities, which, despite national policies, remain central to school-to-school support and improvement in the two areas.

**Barriers to progress**

While these promising developments offer reason for optimism with regard to the English school system’s capacity to collaborate, we also identified various barriers. These include confusion over seemingly uncoordinated policy directives, and uncertainties over roles and responsibilities, all of which have contributed to a lack of coordination at the regional level, and struggles for power over decision-making at the local level.

For instance, in another rural area, some interviewees suggested that schools were being pulled in different directions by uncoordinated educational policy directives. Many of these issues centre on the competing and conflicting priorities of local authorities, teaching schools, and multi-academy trusts, not least regarding the allocation of government funding to facilitate school-to-school support. For example,
one system leader, who heads up a MAT made up of five schools, talked of tensions with her local authority regarding which schools should be targeted for support:

It is all controlled by the local authority people. They tell us who should get money to pay for support. You see, they hold the data – this means that the heads don’t know which schools are struggling.

We also heard of tensions faced by colleagues involved in the work of teaching school alliances who are increasingly spending their time negotiating the creation of multi-academy trusts. Meanwhile, uncertainties were sometimes created for those working in local authorities by the increasing emphasis on teaching schools as the main source of support for school improvement. For example, the head of one teaching school argued that she now finds herself in direct competition with her local authority, which, she argues, is trying to access funding to support its own central school improvement service.

Other school leaders talked of problems created by competing policies. For example, a head teacher of another successful school told of how she had founded an alliance involving nine schools, most of which had been defined as requiring improvement following inspections. She described the group as a “loose federation”. Gradually, some of the schools have chosen to join more formal collaboratives, that is, a MAT or a teaching school alliance. The head explained that this had led to periods of confusion as schools were pulled in different directions. She commented: “There is a danger of networks being too loose”. Similar feelings came from another head, who commented that his “biggest beef” was the arrival of free schools2 “here and there”, which, he suggested, was making local cooperation even more difficult.
Many of these issues stem from a lack of clarity regarding the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders. In particular, confusions seem to have arisen about the intended role of local authorities and teaching schools within a system where multi-academy trusts are becoming the dominant organisational arrangement for school-to-school cooperation. For example, one NLE explained how the academy he was expecting to assist had been instructed to source support from within its own trust, rather than from his teaching school. His view was that the absence of effective coordination in his local area had left a degree of ambiguity regarding this issue. His thought was that the newly established regional school commissioners were in better position to take on this role, although they too are still struggling to define their roles and responsibilities.

Likewise, there remained comparable tensions as different actors jostle for positions, as this system leader explains:

We have a half-termly meeting where all the teaching schools and the local authority get together and discuss stuff, but it’s not always a useful and productive meeting … I don’t think the local authority people really understand the teaching school agenda and therefore they’re not sure where they fit.

Some participants also explained that there had been some regional coordination in the past, and this had proved helpful for sharing experiences and expertise. However, the same participants also claimed that there is currently very little of this kind of activity. Moreover, the distances between schools, and the often isolated and remote geography of a region, were seen as barriers to this kind of cooperation.

Given the relative immaturity of established school-to-school activity in rural areas, it is perhaps unsurprising that participants cited an absence of trust, collaboration,
and knowledge mobilisation. In one county, it was suggested that this problem is a direct result of the local authority choosing to retain its own school improvement service, which is seen to be in direct competition with the teaching schools. It was also argued that funding issues has added to these pressures, because the central school improvement service generates income for the local authority. This led the head of a large secondary school to describe himself as being very negative about the contributions of local authority staff, although he did admit that their involvement has helped to improve what had previously been a chaotic arrangement for nominating schools for support.

**Drawing some lessons**

In reflecting on the evidence we have presented, in this section of the paper we draw lessons that might be relevant to those in other contexts where policy is encouraging schools to compete and collaborate. In particular, we consider to what extent and in what ways schools within a competitive policy context can support one another in promoting improvements. We also consider the extent to which positive rhetoric surrounding school collaboration from policymakers and practitioners is compromised by the realities of such activity. To help us think through these issues and frame our analysis, we draw on the notion of “coopetition”, as defined by Muijs and Rumyantseva (2014), and the following conditions that they suggest are needed in order for it to be effective: partners who see *clear and tangible benefits* from collaboration; *trust between partners*, established through the careful development of relationships between key actors; *clear goals and agreements* between partners; and *forms of leadership that are skilful* in managing tensions. Muijs and Rumyantseva go on to argue that these conditions are likely to be hard to achieve in competitive situations. Bearing this
concern in mind, in what follows we consider each of these conditions in turn, whilst also acknowledging that they do not exist in isolation but, as our data illustrate, are fundamentally interwoven and interdependent.

**Clear and tangible benefits**

Where we saw progress towards school improvement based on cooperation, it was clear that those involved had recognised the potential benefits. In particular, the colleagues we talked to whose schools are providing support frequently spoke of the impact on their own schools. Much of this seemed to be about the professional development opportunities provided by having to support schools facing much more challenging circumstances. This pattern is important in that it draws attention to a way of strengthening relatively low-performing schools that can, at the same time, help to foster wider improvements in the system. It also offers a convincing argument as to why relatively strong schools should support other, less successful schools. This also aligns with research findings that demonstrate a positive impact on student attainment in both higher and lower performing schools as a result of their partnership activity (Chapman, 2015). Put simply, “the evidence is that by helping others you help yourself” (Ainscow, 2015, p. 71).

As our findings suggest, those contexts that are more collaboratively mature feature a range of educational stakeholders working together, sharing their individual perspectives and insights to facilitate school-to-school support and improvement across their respective localities. We would argue that the educational stakeholders in these contexts are demonstrating characteristics of the “deep partnerships” that Greany (2015) suggests currently remain absent from many local and regional school systems in England. Furthermore, our data suggest the local authority is playing a key role in
facilitating this activity. This is noteworthy because of the reduced capacity of this tier of government in recent years as a direct consequence of educational policy directives that have handed more responsibility for organisational maintenance and management to individual and networks of schools. Indeed, as Greany (2015) suggests, in the context of recent structural reforms, local authorities have at once been required to sustain their traditional function of support and challenge, whilst developing new bridging and brokering roles. Moreover, recent research suggests that, despite structural reforms that have significantly reduced the capacity of local authorities in England in recent years, those schools that remain maintained by their local authority perceive a positive relationship with this middle tier of government as a key factor in relation to school-to-school support. In particular, this relates to the role of the local authority in sharing data and intelligence, and commissioning support for school improvement (Gu et al., 2016).

**Trust between partners**

A willingness to share intelligence and engage in professional dialogue was seen as a strong indication of the growth of trust amongst schools. Although such conversations tended to centre on statistical data regarding student progress and school performance, what appeared to be potentially more powerful was the means by which these parties bring their varied experiences and expertise together in order to scrutinise such data. In this way, they are each confronted with different interpretations of the same set of evidence.

We found that, where this works well, it has the potential to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and, in so doing, stimulate creative thinking and problem solving with regard to particular schools and, indeed, the whole education system. In this way,
relationships and trust were strengthened. Such analytical discussion and investigation represent a key facet of the deep partnerships between educational stakeholders that D. H. Hargreaves (2012b) suggests are a necessary ingredient for a functioning self-improving school system. We recognise that there are a number of other important conditions required for such a system to be fully realised. Nevertheless, we argue that pockets of activity such as those described in this paper provide reasons for optimism as to whether the school system in England has the capacity to self-improve.

However, as our data also highlight, there remains the problem of how to get those who are reluctant to join in with processes that they do not see as being to their advantage within the competitive educational market place. Indeed, as Muijs and Rumyantseva (2014) point out, any uncertainty regarding the benefits of the partnership serves to weaken the ties between partners.

Given the complexities surrounding the development of trust within a competitive environment, it is interesting to note the positive influences of the local and regional systems of accountability and evaluation of school-to-school support and improvement that have been established in the examples provided in this paper. In these circumstances, participants reported the importance of having space and a forum through which they can reflect on the work they are undertaking together to support schools and how this process might be improved going forward. So, whilst they often remain in competition, they are still prepared to work towards a broader aim of educational improvement across the localities within which they are situated. The process of members coming together regularly to ensure they are fulfilling their obligations seems to facilitate and strengthen trust between each one.

Seeking to explain such circumstances, Muijs, West, and Ainscow (2010) reflect on social capital theory within the context of networks, suggesting the value of
collaboration from this perspective is that it allows for the harnessing of resources held by all parties as a means of increasing the flow of information. Drawing on the work of Burt (1992), they suggest this kind of networking can plug structural gaps where there exists a paucity of intelligence. Collaboration then becomes a potentially constructive enterprise for all parties, since each, in theory at least, can contribute to plugging these gaps in knowledge, the likelihood of which escalates as the number of actors in a network increases. In short, the partnership becomes stronger than the sum of its parts. Similarly, in his thinking around the self-improving school system, D. H. Hargreaves (2011) draws on social capital as comprising two key elements: trust and reciprocity. He suggests deep partnerships are those in which intelligence and expertise are shared freely thus enhancing and strengthening reciprocity and trust between members.

We argue that, in respect of the data presented in this paper, in those regions where stakeholders have embraced collaboration there is an understanding that, by working together and drawing on their respective strengths, they can ensure the local and regional school systems to which they belong can better meet the needs of the students and the communities they serve. Moreover, in engaging in such collaborative activity and working together to solve issues and address the myriad of challenges they face, these local and regional systems are demonstrating characteristics of the self-improving system imagined by David Hargreaves.

However, it is naïve to ignore the political complexities involved in all of this. In particular, the examples we have drawn upon suggest that there remains a need for sensitivity with regard to what might be seen as a shift in decision making and influence, from local authorities, towards teaching schools and/or multi-academy trusts. Within some contexts, this transition appears to have been reasonably smooth. Yet, as we have illustrated, those in other areas suggested there were tensions that are
characteristic of power struggles regarding decision making. Often, too, access to funding is the battleground around which these struggles take place. While schools continue to compete for financial resources, either through the number of students they can attract, or other sources of income such as the fund discussed in this paper, these tensions will be present. As Muijs and Rumyantseva (2014) suggest, any ongoing and future prospect of competition between members is likely to be detrimental to the strength and sustainability of any partnership.

**Clear goals and agreements**

While we have drawn attention to a number of promising developments that offer encouragement as to how school systems might harness the capacity, capability, and willingness of stakeholders as a means of self-improvement, we have also identified some key issues that are likely to inhibit such progress unless they are addressed. These relate to disputes regarding overall purposes, within a policy context that seems to pull stakeholders in different directions. Related to this are disputes over roles and positioning within the system that can lead to confusion amongst stakeholders and, as we have noted, struggles for power.

Those areas that are more collaboratively mature are characterised by clarity of purpose amongst members as to the aims and goals of their partnership activity. In these contexts, as the preceding sections suggest, this seems to have been achieved through the establishment of clear and tangible benefits for those involved, and the careful nurturing of trust between all parties. Conversely, these features and the conditions within which they have emerged are largely absent from those contexts that are less mature collaboratively. As we have discussed, one of the key challenges for stakeholders across all the areas in which we generated data relates to the shifting roles
of various actors as a result of the on-going structural reforms within the English system. On the one hand, the frantic pace and intensity of such reform is tending to create an overall climate of innovation; whilst, on the other hand, it is leading to some confusion amongst those in the field, not least practitioners, for whom the intensity of daily professional duties leaves limited time for keeping in touch with what is going on.

Related to all of this, Higham and Earley (2013) suggest the level of turbulence and change that has accompanied the structural reforms in England in recent years has left school leaders with a number of concerns. These include the willingness of struggling schools to seek and engage in collaborative support, the means by which local authorities are evolving differently, and the motives of profit-making providers.

The danger is that, within this complex policy context, those trying to promote school cooperation can sometimes become marginalised. Furthermore, as the examples we have provided suggest, some of those involved are pulled in different directions. We have reported, for example, tensions created for colleagues involved in the work of teaching school alliances who are increasingly spending their time negotiating the creation of multi-academy trusts. We also heard of the uncertainties that are being created for those working in local authorities by the increasing emphasis on teaching schools as the main source of support for school improvement.

In addition, further complications have arisen where multi-academy trusts are developing their own in-house school improvement arrangements. In such contexts, there remains a need for sensitivity with regard to local politics and what might be seen as a shift in decision making and influence, from local authorities to teaching schools and/or multi-academy trusts. There also needs to be clarity of purpose and understanding of roles and positioning as regards responsibility for local and regional school improvement. Although this is the case in some contexts, there are other areas
where such clarity or purpose is absent and tensions have arisen as stakeholders jostle for space and influence. This relates to a large-scale survey of school leaders undertaken by Higham and Earley (2013). Amongst their findings was a lack of clarity and a concern amongst head teachers in England as to whether the “patchwork of provision” that has stemmed from the structural reforms “would provide adequate and equitable support” (p. 714) for the schools within the system going forward.

The data presented in this paper align with the findings of other research (e.g., Greany, 2015; Wespieser, Sumner, & Bernardinelli, 2017) in suggesting the level of collaborative maturity across the national school system in England differs considerably. While there are likely to be a multitude of reasons for this, the evidence we have collected suggests that historical factors are particularly important. For example, the large urban context that forms part of our sample has a strong legacy of school-to-school support and improvement. The relationships and trust that have been established over time through such previous partnership work have provided robust and meaningful foundations for their current collaborative activities and a platform on which they have been able to establish clear partnership goals and agreements. In other areas of the country, there is less of a legacy of this kind of collaborative practice. As such, the depth and formality of partnership work is limited at best. Put simply, in these areas, the schools are accustomed to operating in relative isolation rather than working with and supporting one another. This suggests that historical context is a key factor with regard to school-to-school support that needs to be both acknowledged and understood by policymakers and stakeholders.

In a similar way, establishing goals and agreements is influenced by geography. As Coldron et al. (2014) suggest: “proximity and shared community is a natural and therefore common basis for a continuing professional relationship between schools” (p.
In this respect, we have argued that urban contexts can have a natural advantage with regard to collaboration, in that movement between schools tends to be made easier because of shorter distances between schools and greater transport options. At the same time, proximity is likely to lead to greater competition amongst schools, not least regarding the enrolments of students. As we have noted, there also tend to be much greater numbers of teaching schools in urban areas. On the other hand, there are vast areas of the country with limited access to support from teaching schools and NLEs. Together, these factors make the development of school-to-school support arrangements much more challenging.

Skilled leadership

Despite the problems we have identified, the evidence we have presented points to encouraging developments within the English education system regarding schools supporting one another. In particular, we have described what appears to be the emergence of a new generation of school leaders who are developing their skills as system leaders. In working with their colleagues – particularly those with longer experience of supporting other schools – they are enhancing their expertise and growing their professional confidence. It occurs to us that, in the future, these individuals can go on to have an even wider impact by supporting other school leaders in following the path that they have laid.

In moving forward, it is important to note that the positive examples of schools collaborating involved shared leadership. In particular, we saw examples of head teachers working together and with other stakeholders to create a new form of middle tier. In these contexts, local authority staff were seen to be taking on new roles, facilitating these new arrangements and bringing to the discussions their wider
knowledge of the local education system. Commenting on such “leading from the middle” approaches, A. Hargreaves and Ainscow (2015) argue that they can

provide a valuable focus for school improvement; be a means for efficient and effective use of research evidence and analysis of data across schools; provide support so schools can respond coherently to multiple external reform demands; and be champions for families and students, making sure everybody gets a fair deal. (p. 44)

An interesting feature of these emerging arrangements for school-to-school support is that the stakeholders themselves have taken the lead in mobilising their resources and expertise. In so doing, they have established coordinating mechanisms for stakeholder cooperation that provide a formal means of accountability and scrutiny of their collaborative activity. Conversely, the conclusion of the review of the evidence relating to school partnerships and collaboration undertaken by Ainscow (2015) was that the vast majority of the knowledge in this area of the field is reliant upon evaluations of government policy initiatives that were underpinned by or comprised a significant element of inter-school collaboration.

Of course, policy does matter and is influential. In this respect, the examples we have presented have undoubtedly been facilitated by the overarching structural reforms to the school system in England, resulting in an on-going period of repositioning amongst the various actors involved. Again, this might be considered symptomatic of the decentralisation that D. H. Hargreaves (2010) suggested would create the necessary conditions for system-led improvement. Certainly, the stakeholders we spoke to suggest the current educational policy landscape has brought about an educational need for the collaborative arrangements they have established. Furthermore, this was the major driving force behind such activity, rather than any particular initiative and
associated financial incentives. If we are to have any confidence that school systems have the capacity and capability to self-improve, then such examples offer some grounds for optimism.

**Conclusion**

The evidence we provide in this paper suggests that schools are able and willing to support one another, even within a policy context that uses competition as the major driver for improvement. It seems, then, that “coopetition” is possible, although it is difficult to achieve and often remains fragile as a result of policy decisions that pull stakeholders in different directions. Therefore, we must be wary of falling into the trap of thinking all of this is simple and straightforward. For example, writing about the idea of school networking as an improvement strategy, Lima (2008) argues that, despite their growing prevalence, networks have become popular mainly because of faith and fads, rather than solid evidence of their benefits. There is, he argues, nothing inherently positive or negative about a network: “… it can be flexible and organic, or rigid and bureaucratic; it can be liberating and empowering, or stifling and inhibiting; it can be democratic, but it may also be dominated by particular interests” (p. 2).

This is why, in our view, some form of locally led coordination is needed in order to facilitate mutual accountability in relation to agreed principles, and to determine needs, engage stakeholders and broker partnerships. The relatively successful examples of this that we found suggest a possible way forward. They involved shared leadership from within schools, built on previous experience of schools collaborating that had helped to develop relationships and confidence in sharing responsibility. However, our research also led to what was, for us, a surprise in respect to the significant roles played by local authority staff. In some contexts, their actions
acted as barriers to local cooperation, whereas elsewhere they made crucial contributions to its success.

It is predictable that these changing relationships would lead to periods of organisational “turbulence” (Ainscow, Hargreaves, & Hopkins, 1995). The nature of this phenomenon varied from place to place, but in general it arose as a result of the reactions of individuals to ideas and approaches that were disruptive of the status quo of their day-to-day lives. It is worth noting, however, that there is research evidence to suggest that without periods of turbulence, successful, long-lasting change is unlikely to occur (Fullan, 2007). In this sense, turbulence can be seen as a useful indication that things are on the move.

In reflecting on what this involves, we are reminded of Robert Bales’s theory of group systems, used in earlier school improvement research (see Ainscow et al., 1995). Bales predicts that attempts to get different stakeholders to pull together around a common purpose are likely to provoke tensions between the need to establish cohesion amongst groups, whilst, at the same time, taking actions to achieve these goals. Put simply, it is relatively easy to maintain cooperation until the moments when hard decisions have to be made, most particularly regarding the setting of priorities and the allocation of resources.

We must also keep in mind the concern of Hatcher (2014) that the collaborative intent underpinning such arrangements can involve a limited focus on compliance with policy-directed priorities, at the expense of more developmental and democratic structures. In such policy contexts, rhetoric regarding school autonomy that is intended to lead to greater innovation may result in what Lubienski (2003) refers to as “curricular and pedagogical conformity” (p. 419).
District-level administrators can play important roles in this respect. However, they have to adjust their ways of working in response to the development of improvement strategies that are led from within schools. Specifically, they must monitor and challenge schools in relation to the agreed goals of collaborative activities, whilst senior staff within schools share responsibility for the overall management of improvement efforts. In taking on such roles, district-level staff can position themselves as guardians of improved outcomes for all young people and their families – protectors of a more collegiate approach but not as custodians of day-to-day activities (Ainscow, 2016).

Finally, of course, all of this has significant implications for national policymakers. In order to make use of the power of collaboration as a means of achieving excellence and equity in schools, they have to foster greater flexibility at the local level in order that practitioners have the space to analyse their particular circumstances and determine priorities accordingly.

Notes
1. There are 152 local authorities in England. Traditionally, they have been responsible for managing the schools in their areas.
2. These are schools set up by an organisation or a group of individuals, funded by the government but not controlled by a local authority.

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