




Context and Implications Document for: School-to-school collaboration in England: A configurative review of the empirical evidence

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Authors' Introduction

In recent years school-to-school collaboration in the English context has been promoted by a myriad of policy initiatives. Yet, at the same time, the English school system remains a deeply marketised and competitive arena while there are debates concerning the extent to which collaboration between schools can meaningfully facilitate educational improvement and equity. Taking these issues as a starting point, this article reports on findings from a configurative review of the empirical evidence on school-to-school collaboration in England. Drawing empirical evidence from the last two decades, the article provides insight into the reasons why schools enter into collaborative arrangements, the conditions and factors that can facilitate and hinder such activity and the benefits that can result from collaboration between schools. We also identify a number of weaknesses within the field and consider the implications of our findings for educational policy and practice.

Implications for Policy

The policy discourse is awash with aspirational statements about creating a self-improving system led by schools working together and supporting one another to collectively improve the educational attainment and life chances of the young people and communities they serve. In reality, the school system is a marketised space in which

schools are held accountable for their own outcomes and therefore encouraged to be introspective. Such conditions, as the empirical evidence suggests, are not conducive to purposeful collaborative practice. Following this review we would put forward the following recommendations for policy:

- In respect of top-down policy initiatives, incentivising schools to collaborate is not enough. Rather, schools need to be carefully and contextually matched so that they are able to provide mutual challenge and critical friendship informed by evidence as to their strengths and weaknesses.
- Teachers, school leaders and other educational stakeholders all gain from working collaboratively with colleagues outside of their institutions and, indirectly, this is to the advantage of the educational experiences and outcomes of the young people within their schools and classrooms. Facilitating the conditions in which such activity is possible should be a priority for policymakers.
- Moving in this direction within a fragmented school system and a policy context that seems to discourage cooperation requires some form of oversight, orchestration and brokerage, particularly when it involves schools that are located within different local authority boundaries and trusts.