

# **Education as Collaborative Network**

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## **I. Introduction**

This study is a brief summary of three different research undertakings conducted on educational enterprises that has spanned almost a decade from 1993 to the year 2001. The first research project was a two year ethnographic study of three private educational institutions in Spain. This project explored the strategic and operating functions of home-school collaborative educational enterprises. The second research project began in 1999 and was completed only recently. This second research was a case study of organisational transformation in an educational organisation network in Australia. This second project attempted to map out the nature, functions, issues and challenges faced by education network structures. The third research project was completed in the year 2000 and was a 6-month qualitative study of a specific public education reform network in the United States. This last research examined the dynamics of network structures in American education reform. These studies were augmented by the more than ten years experience this researcher has in the areas of policy and management in organisational study and education administration.

### **1.1 Objectives of the study**

The paper attempts to answer three basic questions: (1) what are collaborative networks in education? (2) How extensive and effective are the degrees of collaboration (partnership) that happen in education network? And (3) what types of issues and challenges to these collaborative network face?

### **1.2. Scope and Limitations of the Study**

The data gathered from the studies made are primarily qualitative. Case studies, in-depth interviews and actual immersion activities were conducted with the objective of determining the extent of the issues surrounding collaborative networks.

Made up the Spanish component of the study. In the Australian study, the national office and the state branch of New South Wales were the foci of the research in the Southern hemisphere. On the other hand, three regional centers (Seattle, California and New York) and two school from each center comprised the American experience.

For the Spanish study over fifty interviews and months of participant observation were the main data-gathering instruments of study. In the Australian experience ten (10) in depth interviews and months of participant observation were the sources of information. For the American experience twenty in depth interviews and months of participant observation were the chief data collection instruments used.

### 1.3. Theoretical Framework of the Study

Educational organisations as ‘loosely-coupled structures’ (Weick, 1976): and ‘organisational anarchies’ (Cohen, et.al, 1983) form one of the theoretical pillars of the study’s perspective on the innovative education collaborative network organisations. The ‘network structures’ (Mandell, 1998) and ‘governance in policy network (Rhodes, 1999) serve as the foundation of the study’s premise on network characteristics. The advocacy coalition framework or ACF (Sabatier, 1999) and the institution actors in network (Klickert, et.al. 2000) constitute the backbone of the study’s assumptions on the collaborative networks linkages with the macro political and environment contexts wheree these networks are situated.

## 2. Snapshots of the Case Studies

### 2.1. The Spanish Home-School Partnerships

Three major non-government, non-denominational, educational enterprises in Spain with a total number of seventy-three (73) school and spanning the entire Iberian Peninsula have clearly established a dominant presence in education worldwide. These three enterprises were (1) *FOMENTO Centros de*

*Ensenanza, S.A.* located in Madrid; (2) *the Centros Familiares de Ensenanza, S.A.* situated in Seville and (3) *the Instituto de Familia y Educacion, S.A.* in Barcelona. These share the common philosophy encapsulated in the phrase: “parents first, teachers second and in the ultimate place the students.” these school organisations operate with a very real partnership between educators and families. The brand of education they provide is ‘holistic;’ since it incorporates not only the academic aspects of education but also what they refer to as the ‘personal formation of the individual.’

## 2.2. the Innovative Australian National Schools Network

The NSN remains as one of the most unique attempts at education reform in Australia. It was designed as a collaborative venture formed with an original membership of more than 300 Australian schools (government and non-government, primary and secondary schools) nation wide and with support and participation coming from the commonwealth, the various, states, and the larger community (parents’ associations, universities and teachers’ unions). The key objectives of the NSN are (1) improved learning outcomes through schools re-examining the traditional organisation and practices of teachers (ladwig & white, 1996); (2) spearhead reform efforts and to accomplish these within a school-based setting and (3) carry out these reforms through a cooperative approach: the Commonwealth, states, teachers’ unions, and parents’ groups working together in achieving reform.

## 2.3 The Influential Coalition of Essential School in the US

One of the most succesful education coalitions in the US is the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) where ... office and locatioed in Oakland, California the CES is a reform minded coalition which has over 1.000 member schools all over the American continent. The coalition is a loose network of different types of schools that shared has differing agenda and objectives, but all share in the ideal

that in practising the 10 common principles they would be able to achieve greater educational outcomes in their respective schools.

### 3. What are Collaborative Networks?

This part of the paper discusses the existence of the existence of other organisational forms that attempt to be non-bureaucratic in nature that are present in varied international contexts. These non-traditional organisational structures were borne out of the need to break out from the conventional hierarchical forms that have dominated education organisations since the early nineteenth century. These forms range from what are called coalitions, federations and networks. The interesting feature that all these unique organisational structures possess is the conscious attempt to dismantle strong hierarchical, bureaucratic presence.

Two main schools of thought provide possible answers to the rise of networks in educational systems. The first school can be described as those that believe that networks have been the de facto organisational structure of educational institutions.

#### 3.1. Loosely-Coupled System and Organisational Anarchies

Karl Weick describes educational organisations as loosely-coupled system.

People in organisations, including educational organisations, find themselves hard pressed either to find actual instance of those rational practices or to find rationalised practices whose outcomes have been as beneficent as predicted, or to feel that those rational occasions explain much of what goes on within the organisation. Parts of some organisations are heavily rationalised but many parts also prove intractable to analysis through rational assumptions. (Weick, 1976:1)

Cohen refers to educational institutions as organised anarchies.

‘organised anarchies are organisations characterised by problematic preference, unclear technology and fluid participation.’ (Cohen, et.al., 1988:294)

Weick and Cohen methodically explain that educational institutions are jumbled and complicated forms of organisations. Nevertheless, in the midst of the

complexity and overlap of roles, powers and functions – educational organisations can still be clearly distinguished and still manage to accomplish its myriad objectives.

Weick and Cohen imply that loose-coupling in organisations and instances of organisational anarchies are natural characteristics of education systems. However, rather than impede the dynamics of educational organisations, loose-coupling and organisational anarchy form a significant part of the organisational processes that occur within educational systems.

The other school of thought believes that networks are functional models of managing organisations.

### 3.2 Epistemic Communities, Implementation and Network Structures

There is another form of network as conceived by Haas that can be ascribed to educational organisations. This is what he refers to as an epistemic community. ‘an epistemic community is a network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue area.’ (Haas, 1992:3)

Hjern and Porter also formulate a slightly different variant of a network type of organisation which they described as an implementation structure. ‘an implementation structure is comprised of subsets of members within organisations which view a programme as their primary (or an instrumentally important) interest. For these actors, an implementation structure is as much an administrative structure through which purposive actions are taken as the organisations in which they are employed.’ (Hjern and Porter, 1981:253)

Mandell’s network structures ‘consists of public, private and non-for-profit organisations and/or individuals in an active, organised collaboration to accomplish some agreed purpose or purposes. They are distinguished from traditional organisations because not only is there no hierarchy, there is no-one in charge. In addition a network structure is formed because all the members recognise that their purposes cannot be achieved independently and thus all action

is mutually interdependent and does not rely on who has the most power.’  
(Mandell,1999:46)

Haas, Hjern and Porter and Mandell claim that these differing strains of network type organisations are discretionary, potent approaches in management of people and resources. They claim that these alternate modes of organisations have characteristics different from traditional organisation forms. Furthermore, these new form of network organisations may provide distinct functional advantages over traditional forms. These new variants of organisation structures provide a choice over the traditional politically-driven bureaucratic and economically-driven market model.

### **Coalitions and Federations**

A coalition is an alliance between separate groups which may have differing long-term goals this alliance is often only temporary, lasting only as long as the alliance is mutually beneficial. Furthermore, it is predicated on each party in the coalition being able to achieve that portion of its goals which happens to coincide with the other parties goals and objectives at the time. (Dudley and Vidovich, 1995:52)

A coalition is an alliance of different stakeholders joined together in an attempt to pursue and accomplish mutually beneficial goals. In the colourful history of reform movements in Australia and in other parts of the world, coalitions have played a significant role in achieving varied levels of success in many fronts.

Federation of small schools can lend considerable strength to all of them as well as allowing them to preserve their individuality. It must, however, be handled and resources properly. If a federation of five, ten or fifteen small schools is to work properly than teachers must sink any petty rivalry and jealousy and concentrate on the greater good. (Norton, 1987:135)

A federation is almost like a coalition. The main difference is that the federation is a less informal type of organisation. The quality of sharing common ideals whilst preserving individual goals and objectives is also present in federations. As mentioned by North above, a crucial element for the effective

functioning of a federation is the focus and concentration that individual members need to do in order to preserve the common and greater good.

### **Networks and their keys to success**

A network is also similar to a coalition and to a federation. The difference (this is something that is almost indiscernible) is that a network compared to coalitions and federations is more “loosely-coupled,” and has no identifiable “permanent leader.” Parker described what he calls the five “key” ingredients of a network.

The five key ingredients of networks

1. A strong sense of commitment to the innovation.
2. A sense of shared purpose.
3. A mixture of information sharing and psychological support.
4. An effective facilitator.
5. Voluntary participation and equal treatment. (Parker in Lieberman and Grolnick, 1996:9)

The ingredients mentioned above are important to consider: -- (i) commitment, (ii) shared purpose, (iii) information sharing and psychological support, (iv) an effective facilitator and (v) voluntary participation and equal treatment – for these are ingredients that ALL members of the network should continually strive for. The prescription that Parker offers for successful networks to function simply requires transparency, teamwork and decency.

### **How do education network work?**

Educational networks bridge two cultures. On the one hand they are connected to a system that organises the delivery of education to school-age children through an elaborate system of codes, regulations, standards, and assessments. On the other hand, they support the professional development of teachers and administrators who work within that system, who need to be

free to step outside of it in order to consider ways to improve the very schools and system within which they work. (Lieberman and Grolnick,1996:36)

According to Lieberman and Grolnick educational network function as portals. They “bridge” the more formal and hierarchie culture of teaching in the classroom with all the accompanying wherewithal and also the informal yet equally important culture of personal and professional development for educators. The network offers a respite, where people within the more formal bureaucratic school structure can pause- -without incurring any risk of slowing down the bureaucratic engine – and reflect on their craft with the intention of improving them.

The powerful effects of networks

First, teachers and administrators are given opportunities to label, articulate and share the facit knowledge that they have developed through their work.

Second, networks have the flexibility to organise activities first, letting the structures needed to support those activities follow, instead of the other way around.

Third, we found that these networks were attempting to shift the meaning of adult learning away from prescription toward challenging involvement and problem solving.

Fourth, although each of the networks we studied had a formal leader, there were numerous opportunities for members to take leadership roles.

Fifth, networks provide numerous examples of collaboration among their members.

It is worthwhile going through each of the capital “powerful effects” of networks as described by Lieberman and Grollnick. The first point that they raise is the notion that networks provide “opportunities” for teachers and administrators “to label, articulate and share the tacit knowledge that they have developed through their work “essentially what .....networks effectively provide a “voice” for both .....who are .....listening to the voice of teachers and administrators. This is dramatically opposed to the bureaucratic model of school structure that creates distances among its members – schools, administrators, parents and students – thus leading to a metaphorical “silence” in schools.

The second powerful effect of networks is simply put the adage of “form follows function.” In networks, members get to do and engage in activities without worrying too much about structures, rules and regulations. This again is anathema to the typical bureaucratic school organisation, where activities and projects of teachers and administrators – whether they be routine or new – need to be able to fit into an existing mould, a current regulation within the school.

The third powerful effect of network can be rephrased as “learning through challenges and problem-solving.” The assembly-line mode of teaching and learning that is commonplace in school organisations is somehow spruced up through the introduction of challenges and problems that need to be addressed.

The fourth salient effect of networks is something that is badly needed in educational organisations ---ongoing opportunities for academic leadership. Too often in a highly-bureaucratic educational structure, leadership opportunities are very limited, leadership creativity and innovation are oftentimes stifled by hierarchical obstacles.

The fifth effect is concerned with collaboration among members of network. It must be pointed out here that collaboration – or teamwork among active and genuinely enthusiastic individuals in accomplishing an agreed objective – is very different from “performing a group chore,” – which may not even group participants to communicate. Much of the lacklustre that happens in

overly formal organisation set-up is the prevalence of performing group chores that are routine and that do not encourage nor promote active and enthusiastic cooperation and collaboration from members.

The fifth effect discusses the merits of mutual knowledge learning and collaboration versus transmission of knowledge. On the one hand, transmission of knowledge assumes that one party has the knowledge while the other does not. On the other hand, mutual knowledge learning and collaboration implicitly assumes that the amount, equality or disparity of knowledge among the parties in the transaction are not vital what is important is that everyone in the network learns and collaboration in mutual .....

#### **4. How effective are collaborative networks?**

##### 4.1. The Spanish Experience

Home-school partnerships by their very nature encourage active collaboration between the families of the school and the officials and staff of school. The history, development and eventual prosperity of home-school partnerships depend to a large extent to the level of active collaboration between parents and school officials (Reyes, 1997:102)

Parents as the backbones of many small schools, helping out with transport, running jumble sales and fetes, and leading fierce support if the school is threatened. Any small school which alienates its parents does not stand a chance. Yet parents can also be a powerful political force, since they are usually both ratepayers and voters. (Wragg in North, 1987:133)

Parents in home school partnerships become an indispensable component in the life of the school. Aside from being the most stable and direct source of financial resources of the school, they also act as the vanguards in marketing and defending the resources of the school, they also act as the vanguards in marketing and defending the school.

Another equally impressive trait that home-school partnership type of schools possess is the existence of a unique school corporate culture. The relatively small size of the school, the familiarity that pervades among parents,

school staff and students facilitate easy dissemination and actual practice of the school spirit. The core group of parents who have collaborated in establishing the school, the school officials and the more senior members of the student body are more often than not familiar with the general mission and aims of the school. (Reyes, 1997:97)

Decision making by consensus is not decision making by democratic majority (which may be as slim as one) but is decision making which relies on each member of the group coming to the same particular point of view. It is only where the group is on total agreement that a decision is made thus decision making by .....in the group not only speaking with one voice, but each member of the group being in accord with the decision and, particularly with its philosophies. (Dudley and Vidovich, 1995:52)

Decision-making in home-school partnerships is usually carried through what is referred to as collegial government. This form of government requires that all members of decision making body be fully cognisant of the definition and the ramifications of the school philosophy. Thus, in a collegial government set-up, typical of home-school partnerships, the process of decision-making and the implementation of decision ensures that the singular educational philosophy of the school is propagated.

Moreover, the 'smallness' of the home-school partnerships give these types of schools flexibility in implementing their curricula which stems from a uniting and singular educational philosophy. Most of the academic and extra-curricular activities of school such as these – freed from the oftentimes stifling bureaucratic requirements of states education systems and traditional private non-denominational schools – are usually centred on the unique educational philosophies of the home-school partnerships (Reyes, 1997:21)

## **Organisational Change**

Recently, these educational enterprises in Spain, indeed the entire country itself has started to experience a serious problem with regard to school – a dangerously declining birth rate. Consequently, school enrolments across the country are dwindling; schools that have weak financial positions are closing down.

Although these three educational enterprises are relatively stable, they have had to alter their organisational structures. Each of these enterprises has incorporated within their set-up a foundation. These foundations are tax-exempt and provide substantial tax cuts to donors and contributors to the enterprises and provide much needed extra resource base for their schools.

### 4.2. The Australian Experience: The National Schools Network

The main findings of the Australian research can be grouped into three categories, as they were described by the strategic stakeholders (network actors) of the network. These categories are: (1) the complementary or consistent beliefs, practice, processes, powers and decision-making within the network structure; (2) the conflicting and contradictory network dynamics of the NSN and (3) the areas that featured .... Thus, themes and challenges for the network structure.

The complementary phases identified by the network actors in the study were: (1) the idea that the NSN creates space for teachers to view each other's work practice, (2) the contribution of the NSN in 'teaching training,' (3) the invaluable assistance provided by the NSN through 'networking;' (4) the NSN's ability to 'break down traditional structures;' and (5) the unique characteristic of the NSN being 'built within the industrial agreement between employers and unions.'

The conflicting dynamics derived from the testimonies of the network actors in the study were (1) the inconsistencies in the 'NSN leadership;' (2) the disparities in the 'NSN objectives;' (3) the difficulties of the NSN in terms of its' accessibility and collaborative characteristics;' (4) the disagreements on the extent of the 'NSN's impact;' and (5) inconsistencies in the network actors' perceptions on the 'NSN future.'

The areas that have been identified as those that provide issues and challenges for the NSN were the following: (1) the uncertain 'role of the federal government;' (2) the existence of 'flattened leadership in the network;' (3) the practice of 'critical reflection;' (4) the pervasiveness of 'power and politics' and (4) the opposing stances of network actors on NSN 'policy influence.'

### **Organisational Change**

In the first three years, or the "good old days" of the NSN, the commonwealth labor government spearheaded a radical effort by inviting all the significant stakeholders in educational transformation. Whith the initial years of enthusiasm and more importantly – funding from the commonwealth – the NSN of 1993 to 1996 appeared to herald a breakthrough in the languishing education sector of Australia. However, the wheels of politics and power had a different agenda.

In 1996, a new government came into power in Australia. It was a predominantly liberal government that came in to replace the labor government. The new liberal condition government led by Prime Minister John Howard had a different political agenda, especially in regard to education.

The Howard government introduced a new approach in education reform. "the new national education reform agenda has been matched by the expansion of devolved forms of school self-management in the states' and territories' education system. Self management at the school level has been accompanied by the vigorous development of regimes of measurable accountability and an industrial

relations environment which weakens the ethos of teacher cooperation.”  
(Wilkinson et. Al. 1996:15)

Black more (1996) and Hargreaves (1994) have warned that the introduction of self management and the implementation of industrial relations type of environment which will eventually lead to competition in schools is anathema to the fostering of cooperative relationships and to reforms of the collaborative kind. The race to be “better than the other school,” which in free-market theory would translate to better services for the clientele may – from an educational perspective – effectively undermine reform efforts fueled mainly by collaborative ventures.

Grundy and Bonser (1997) in their study asks a pivotal question about school reform when they raise the issue of the new federal liberal government (led by Prime Minister John Howard) installed in March 1996. the post-1996 scenario in education saw a deliberate jump into the area of “small government.” The consequence of this is that the role of the commonwealth was further reduced in relation to school education. The NSN, an innovative organisational idea initially conceived, supported and maintained by the commonwealth government was adversely affected by this transformation.

When the new Howard government came into power in 1996, ....support for the NSN which mainly the commonwealth ...ended ...commonwealth .....NSN national coordinating body however, the commonwealth ... yet .....representative to the regular meetings. Although the commonwealth have not de jure declared its withdrawal from the NSN program, de facto its decision to cut off financial support to the network has made the NSN a virtual orphan.

In the year following the changes in the education reform agenda introduced by the 1996 Howard government, the NSN was forced to experience another organisational transformation, an unexpected yet necessary change that it needed to undertake in order to survive. with membership fees, research funds from both public and private coffers and others and others to survive. With membership fees, research funds from both public and private coffers and other sources of income and support, the NSN stubbornly plodded forward.

#### 4.3. The American Experience: The Coalition of Essential Schools

Below are just two examples of how the coalition of essential schools has made an impact on education policy in the US:

In the late 1990s, the federal government enacted the comprehensive school reform program grant. In the conceptualization of the program grant, representatives from the coalition were part of the planning committee. Moreover, schools belonging to the coalition were identified as models of schools that had implemented comprehensive school reform. Thus, this grant is made available to any school that may choose to pattern its reform along the lines adopted by coalition schools. (Coalition of Essential Schools Regional Executive)

The Gates' foundation had recently released a huge amount of resources for reform effort in schools in America. The main criteria for these grants are what the Gates foundation refers to as the seven attributes of highly-successful schools. These attributes directly cover the 10 common principles of the coalition. Scholars predict that the coalition and its schools will play a significant role in the implementation of these grants. (Coalition of Essential Schools Regional Executive)

#### Organisational Change

The two main reasons for the shift of power from the Coalition of Essential Schools National Office (CES National) – originally located at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island to the regional offices of the coalition. The first reason is that the scope of CES became too large with some 1200 schools listed as members crisscrossing the vast American continent. CES National saw that it was almost impossible for them to “get to know” the member schools from the other states. The second reason was a change in leadership. Ted Sizer, the acknowledged founder of the coalition retired and decided to “hand over the reins” of the coalition to someone else. The incumbent executive director of CES National coincidentally was from Oakland California. Thus, the entire CES

national was transplanted from brown university to Oakland, California.  
(Coalition of Essential School Executive).

At the same time, funding from CES national and from other sources was made available to support the creation of regional centers in different areas of the country.

All the CES schools – scattered in different regional centers in America – share the 10 common principles; how these are practiced depend on the circumstances and conditions that each school faces.

In the mid-eighties, the coalition was experiencing rapid growth. Towards the mid-nineties, the coalition already had more than 1,250 members. A decision was then made to decentralized the coalition. At about the same time, a huge endowment was given to CES national by ambassador Walter Annenberg. This endowment proved to be of great importance in the decentralization effort of CES national. (Coalition of Essential Schools National Executive)

## 5. Implication of the Study

We favour attempts to bring about such improvements by working from the inside out, especially by enlisting the support and skills of teachers as key actors on reform. This might be seen as a positive kind of tinkering, adapting knowledgeably to local needs and circumstances, preserving what is valuable and correcting what is not. But the teachers do not do the job alone. They need resources of time and money, practical design for change and collegial support. And they can succeed best if they do their work in partnership with parents. (Tyack and Cuban, 1995:10)

Consistent with international effort to bring about reform in primary and secondary education and with the principle of working ‘inside out’ – that is eliciting support of teachers as key actors of reform in partnership with parents, the study comes out with the following conclusions and recommendations:

1. Home-school partnerships contribute a great deal in offering alternative choices to parents in the task of educating their children. These kinds of initiatives should be supported by local and national government bodies. Two ways of doing this

would be by (i) reallocating some of the education public fund toward home-school partnership initiatives and (ii) providing tax incentives to home-school partnerships and similar incentives.

2. The formation and networking of formal and informal education bodies that can provide technical assistance in various ways to groups of parents desirous of initiating home-school partnerships should also be encouraged.
3. A greater interaction between state and national education accreditation bodies and home school partnerships should be fostered; primarily to improve the quality of the latter and also to avoid incidences where these types of schools fall into inefficiency and lack of effectiveness.
4. An increased sensitivity on the part of national and regional education policy-makers and practitioners on the impact and influence of politics to the existence and maintenance of education network structures.
5. The establishment of safeguards for education network structures against the debilitating effects of 'party politics' influences and the creation of favourable conditions for the institutionalisation of network structures.

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