Sabbatical report: Collaboration and Competition- Winners and Losers

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Introduction

In NZ in the1990s Tomorrow's Schools set up an environment of self-managing schools with a market-driven philosophy of competition. Partly it was to encourage accountability from teachers and schools, but it was also aimed at getting greater parental and community involvement in schools. The outcome I am focussed on is that some schools became winners in that environment, but other schools did not do so well. The competition exacerbated existing inequalities of outcomes for some students.

Collaboration and networking is now being promoted to counter some of the deficits that continue to exist. Sharing information, strategies that work and joint problem-solving through collaboration would appear to be just common sense. In fact collaboration has occurred naturally in the NZ education system, in a variety of ways. In the beginning of Tomorrow's schools "clusters" were established for ease of introducing the new legislated compliances and training to meet them. Some clusters were strong, but many did not flourish beyond their initial purpose. Different clusters of schools were later formed to deliver particular Ministry of Education contracts. Again, most did not survive more than a year or two beyond their initial contract completion. [Cherie Taylor-Patel's paper referenced below, gives a good list of the various cluster initiatives].

In Canada, Michael Fullan was an early advocate of collaboration instead of competition. Michael Fullan (2006) promoted a 'profound shift away from isolation and autonomy, and towards reprivatized practice, away from traditional silos of classroom and school towards a system-wide learning organization.'

In NZ 2014, our government introduced IES, an initiative to promote collaboration instead of competition. This was a profound 180 degree turn. The current "Community of Schools/IES" is an MOE initiative- based on OECD's findings- and aimed at improving teaching practice, enabling better collaboration between teachers and schools, and helping all children benefit from the skills and knowledge of great teachers from across a group of schools. It will formalise the collaboration of schools that provide a 'pathway for students in the community', select leaders, and agree priority goals that arise from a shared analysis of the Community of Schools' data. [Investing in Education Success, p12, New Zealand Education Gazette, 5 may, 2014]

The Issue

The issue then arises- if schools are competing for students and they do manage to grow their school rolls and income, what do they risk if they seek to achieve equitable outcomes for students across all the schools in the area through a collaborative Community of Schools? Potentially, or theoretically, the previous "winner" schools could lose their competitive edge. Losing students means losing staff and then losing the benefits of additional funding which usually allows discretionary spending. The obvious benefits of formal collaboration versus the possible loss of a competitive edge is the issue.

For some principals and school leaders, the Community of Schools collaboration calls for a different set of skills and a totally different attitude. I am one of those principals that need a change of attitude, and simple logic would not achieve that change (smokers know the logic behind not smoking yet still don't stop smoking). At the time of the sabbatical I was feeling tired, stretched with too many competing initiatives demanding my time and effort (all very worthy, of course), as well as the usual tasks from curriculum, data load, property, and the rest that principals have to prioritise and manage. I was not feeling inclined to add another project, another priority, another distraction, especially when I didn't accept that the benefits of collaboration outweighed the risks of losing our competitive edge.

Why the change

"Differences in education and skills between countries explain the difference in rates of economic growth more than any other single factor". (MBIE Business Growth Agenda, 2012). The revised NZ Curriculum, for the first time in NZ education history, acknowledges the extrinsic economic value of education. It is fair to claim that previously education had been untainted by such concerns and instead extolled the intrinsic value of education and the value of learning for its own sake.

Finland acknowledged this new economic imperative in the early 1990s, when their economy was in poor shape, and the Finns made radical changes to their education system to address it. They have topped the international education measures (PISA) since 2000. Finland did not however introduce a competitive school system, nor appraisals of teachers, or student testing and data gathering. They decided on a high trust model based on selecting only the top 10% of candidates to go into teaching, training them to Masters Level, maintaining quality on-going professional development and then allowing an individualistic approach. They have monthly collaborative meetings between principals, a variety of leadership systems, little data gathering, and instead they focus on a joint sharing of strategies to meet identified issues. There is a very strong professional development focus.

NZ did reasonably well in the international PISA comparisons, but has always struggled with the number of students who are 'under-achieving' – and there is a concern that other nations are rapidly improving and NZ perhaps sliding down the league table. The NZ Government is now asking schools to establish *Communities of Schools* to encourage collaboration, siting evidence that collaborating in regional networks in partnership with our communities produces better outcomes for students.

Definition

The term "collaboration" is used frequently in discussions of future-focussed pedagogy "Create future-focused learning environments: Design vibrant, technology-rich, cyber-safe learning environments. Make these environments flexible enough to serve multiple learning contexts,

including one-to-one, small groups, <u>collaborative</u> and community learning. Put learning at the heart of the system. Build regional capability through <u>collaboration</u>: Invest in regional networks of educators to create, foster and spread innovative practice." [21st Century Learning Reference group, "Future-focussed learning in connected communities"]

Every educator from every country that I talked to confirmed the value of collaboration, but what that collaboration entailed varied hugely. Dr Cherie Taylor-Patel's APPA Fellowship report explains the differences in detail, so I will just conclude this section by saying that the somewhat artificial "community" of schools created by the supposed 'natural educational pathway' is not necessarily the best or most obvious grouping. Collaborative groupings based on perceived shared needs, which may not have any geographical link, appeared to have greater imperative for the participants. The groupings may be as small as 2 schools linked through common need.

Collaboration was established between teachers, principals and district leaders, but the leadership of those collaborations was a regular point of discussion.

Considerations for Successful Collaboration

- A shared **vision** that brings all conversation back to what is agreed upon as the most important focus, so that it's not a battle of competing perspectives but rather how to best realize this vision. The most satisfied 'collaborators' had developed their own agendas and it did not have to involve the worst student data. They were joined together and motivated by what they all wanted to achieve, not just because they were a geographical pathway. As Aini Kristina Jappen explained at the ICP conference in Helsinki 2015, "collaboration is more than just cooperation. It is about gaining synergy from one another : 1+1<2

- **Effective leadership** to keep the group on track towards the vision is also necessary – but each jurisdiction seemed to address this aspect differently. For the Chinese it seemed to be professors, Canada selected principals or expert teachers, Finland it was colleagues taking turns, Singapore promoted selected principals, Hackney selected outstanding principals. In Shanghai the collaboration happened under the auspices of the university providing the leadership. In Shanghai and Singapore teachers and principals are required to complete so many hours of professional development over a set number of months, and an element of collegial collaboration is expected. I saw two report back sessions by pairs of Singaporean teachers.

- Having the **right people** involved and including teachers, principals, curriculum experts and pedagogical leaders. There needs to be sufficient 'capacity' available so everyone can move forward efficiently, though some systems varied greatly and there was almost unquestioned faith in the democratic process. Part of this also is the need for developing trusting relationships and there is a lot of NZ-based research to support this aspect. You have to be comfortable with the people you are going to work with on a challenging issue.

- **Knowledge** of what is involved to ensure effective change for the different stages of school development. The McKinsey Report (Mourshed, Chikioke, & Barber, 2010) found that if a school is struggling, certain changes needed to be mandated before they join a more collaborative process." Each particular stage of the school system improvement journey is associated with a unique set of interventions." The Hackney district in London based their change improvement on the McKinsey Report suggestions. They make strong use of student achievement data to identify which schools should be 'married' (Sian Davies' word)

in order to get the best use of time and effort. Using the huge data base they hold about achievement in each school, Sian could suggest working groups of schools, and with her wide view of the district she could also identify which people would be the most useful to help the schools in need.

- **Resourcing** :space to meet, funding release and possibly new input
- **Time**,: Collaboration demands time together, preferably face to face though maybe sometimes on-line. Time is a challenging resource for busy people. Where-ever collaboration was a professed agenda, then time during the working day was usually provided. In Canada it was during "prep" time within a school for teachers, and also during school day for principals, Teachers PD interests and requests were discussed with the principals through their elected lead teachers. In Singapore teachers have 14 hours a week class contact time with the balance as professional learning time [MOE, 2013a, Ministry Cross-sector Forum on Raising Achievement: Summary Record Friday 1 November 2013. Retrieved at http://minedu.govt.nz]. In Shanghai there is a requirement for 360 hours of PD over 3 years, and the time is negotiated with their leaders. In Finland the principals scheduled collaborative meetings for once a month for 2 -3 hours in a morning (that was repeated frequently, as opposed to the end of the day after school). In Hackney it was during the school day and involved principals, lead teachers and Ministry-funded leadership, though in Crowborough the collaboration between David Westcombe's school and his neighbouring school happened whenever the was the best time for the purpose. It was summer vacation when I was there and the school leaders were meeting for a full day. The number of hours a teacher spends in contact time has an impact on their ability and motivation for collaborative learning and practices. [Sara Mosle, "Building better Teachers", The Atlantic, September, 2014]
- **Professional Development** The element of professional development was a strong consistent factor in all cases and the topic was generally set by the participants own choice. In an area where there was so much diversity, the focus on professional development and inquiry spirals/ action research was one consistent factor. There was also acknowledgement of the need for specific skill sets to be provided for all leaders (principals and teachers). Hong Kong and Shanghai, and Singapore provide that leadership development in a formal and centralised way and there is formal certification and inspection reviews. In the UK the National College for School Leadership provides a range of courses

Cherie-Taylor Patel's paper fully discusses the components for successful collaboration and summarises it thus:

"When setting up networks the purpose of the network needs to be clear. A shared vision and shared goals need to be developed by key participants that are aligned with personal beliefs and individual school goals, as well as network goals. Time to build relationships is important, as it is the strength of the relationships that will determine the levels of commitment for network activities and the quality of the joint learning that happens over time. Strong networks have many participants at many different levels. While leaders have an important role to play, it is critical to involve teachers in the planning of network activities, as it is at the classroom level that innovation and improvement happens. Resourcing to make network activities "part of" not "as well as" daily work happening in schools is essential, if network priorities are to be sustainable. Effective networks need to be focused on goals that are about making learning work for every child, in every school".

Stanford University researchers have proposed 5 success factors in their Collective Impact model

The Five Conditions of Collective Impact	
Common Agenda	All participants have a shared vision for change including a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions.
Shared Measurement	Collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants ensures efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable.
Mutually Reinforcing Activities	Participant activities must be differentiated while still being coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.
Continuous Communi-cation	Consistent and open communication is needed across the many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.
Backbone Support	Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organization(s) with staff and a specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative and coordinate participating organizations and agencies.

Lessons from Hackney

This London Borough, between 2006- 2011, went from one of the lowest achieving boroughs nationally, to achieving above the national average through small clusters of federated schools under strong and experienced leadership. Michael Fullan, in his book "Motion Leadership in Action: More skinny on becoming savvy", Corwin, 2013 describes the story of Trish Okoruwa, the charismatic, no excuses leader. Sadly she died just months before I was due to meet her, however, the strength of the "systemness" (Fullan's term), is that in meeting Sian Davies, the direction, motivation, vision and impetus for constant improvement is still there. Improvement is still about no excuses, critical leadership, using data to prove students are progressing, knowing the people well and making good 'matches' , and disseminating good practice.

The Hackney Learning Trust demonstrates the Stage 4 qualities described in the McKinsey report.

Hackney used the McKinsey report to guide the strategies most suitable for getting improvement depending on the stage of the school's student achievement levels
1. Getting to fair: checking for compliance, directive, non-negotiables interventions, aiming for quality first teaching
2. Fair to Good: inclusion, more staff involved, student voice, parent inclusion
3. Good to Great- gaps start to narrow and there is more personalised learning, creativity – team leaders involved, sustainability of improvement, student articulation (voice), growing peer review
4. Unstoppable Innovation- internally driven, self-reviewing, lots of sharing and collaboration, student agency, teachers accurately self –monitor, staff ownership, new curricular

The Benefits of Collaboration for schools and individuals

The literature on networks talks about the "moral purpose", of ensuring a mindset that perceives all of the children in the network as being "our" students, rather than a single focus on "my" students. Hargreaves (2011) suggests this comes about when teachers and students have direct contact with those from another school. He says further that in a teaching school alliance, it requires more than just sharing good practice. "The best way to move practice is to move those who practise it close to the site to which it is to be moved. Alliances have an enhanced ability to move people within their networks, and they should use it. When such peer-to-peer sharing takes place it is not a matter of unilateral practice transfer, important as that can be. Rather, through mutual observation and coaching the donor reflects further on the practice that is being shared and explores ways in which it can be improved further. This is a process to which the recipient can also contribute as an act of reciprocity. In short, what begins as sharing practice ends up as a co-construction of practice that entails incremental innovation. The term that most accurately describes this process is joint practice development, for it captures a process that is truly collaborative, not one-way; the practice is being improved, not just moved from one person or place to another"

In the UK, John Hartley, headmaster of Saffron Walden County High School, explained the benefits for being a mentor school

- The teachers and leaders who get involved become, quite simply, better teachers and leaders
- You can always learn something new about how to improve teaching and learning, manage behaviour and raise standards when you go into another school
- There are a number of things you see that cause you to reflect on your own practice
- It helps to identify potential problems before there is any drop of standards in your own school
- The outreach work helps to retain and recruit quality staff because partnership outreach is professionally rewarding and potentially career-enhancing
- It provides an enhanced perspective on the issues facing your own organisation, which should provide fresh ideas and insights to help raise standards.

Conclusions

In NZ competition for students still applies, despite the call for collaboration. There is a strong incentive for schools to retain their competitive edge while there is no strict zoning policy in place and parents have the right to choose the school for their family.

Competition for students between schools **was not an issue** for any of the jurisdictions visited. Some allowed parent choice of schools, but that hadn't resulted in serious competition between schools (eg Hackney and Finland). **These jurisdictions did not promote competition**. The perception there seems to be that schools are roughly equal and if there was an issue in a school, there was confidence that support would be available to address it.

The growing international call for more collective effort through collaboration applies equally to school district leaders, principals, teachers within and between schools, and for students. It is awarded intrinsic as well as economic value and business people also extolled the virtues of collaborative skills for their workers.

There is ample research internationally, as well as in NZ, that describes the necessary conditions for successful collaboration. There is evidence anecdotally as well as measured empirically that the mentors as well as the ones being mentored gain from collaboration.

To teach something to someone else, you gain as a learner at the same time.
 In trying to protect our school's competitive advantage am I at risk of denying an opportunity for growth for our great teachers, myself and our school? Maybe we can be collaborative and collaborative at the same time.

Maybe, in being prepared to collaborate, we can also grow and at the same time, retain our competitive edge?

Not OK to be PC

It is generally considered politically correct for one to be accepting of all cultures and their different values. However, something happened in Birmingham recently that has me questioning whether there is a risk to our own cultural values in always being 'politically correct' and culturally inclusive?

I read a report of a "Trojan school" tactic in Birmingham, whereby the Muslim parents of the local state schools took control of the school governance and ousted the duly-appointed non-Muslim staff, segregated boys and girls into different classes, and then taught an Islamic curriculum. These were state schools, not private religious schools. All of the local children had to attend these schools. The response in the UK was to revise the curriculum to include core British values of such things as democracy.

To explore the question from the other side of the coin, I visited Oman. Muslim schools there have no issue with teaching their values and requiring allegiance to their Sultan. Private schools are able to teach their IB curriculum and address religious differences as part of their globalisation studies. The programme requires more than just looking at what festivals and ceremonies different cultures celebrate. It is incorporated into their values programme. In other words, local values are specifically expressed.

As our schools become more multi-cultural it is becoming more important to pay considered attention to what constitutes global competencies for teachers and what we need to specifically address in our curriculum. It is about what we value and concerns more than what we generally consider as 'values'. It is about what we believe is important in our society.

It may be considered politically incorrect to present our values as being superior, but when we speak out in defence of free speech and against censorship, **are we risking offending and not being inclusive?**

I believe we need to teach about respectful expression of opinions and questioning the reasons for decisions we find difficult to understand.

When we see some of our boys being disrespectful to our girls or those they consider beneath them on the social ladder I believe we need to teach that boys and girls and all people are of equal worth.

For those who believe that might is right and that strength to rule is a virtue, we need to teach democracy and how it works.

For those who accept that corruption, graft and back-handers are just a way of doing business, we need to teach the value of transparency and honesty.

For people who believe that education is the chanted repetition of text we need to teach the value of a liberal education and wide introduction to variety of texts

For those who believe that good children are those who should be seen and not heard and just do what they are told, we need to teach them the value of questioning and problem-solving.

Have we really questioned what we do believe in? Have we questioned what we value in our country? Have we put it into words?

If we are too afraid to offend by being explicit about what we will not "include" ,then perhaps we risk losing that which we value most.

And why are we afraid of being called "not PC"? Who decides that anyway?

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Leadership mindsets

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