

Response to the Education Committee-

Introduction/Background to Partnership;

Within the Newry and Mourne ALC there are 16 member schools including the Newry Campus of SRC. Given that the geographical span of our ALC is so wide, stretching from Newtownhamilton through to Kilkeel, we have divided the community of schools in to more feasible collaborative partnerships comprising of what we term as;

- The Western Campus (Schools in the South Armagh area)
- The Central Campus (Schools in the Newry City area)
- The Eastern Campus (Schools in Warrenpoint and Kilkeel)

Our partnership in the Western Campus includes four schools;

1. St Paul's High School, Bessbrook
2. Newtownhamilton High School
3. St Joseph's High School, Crossmaglen
4. Newry High School

Together we offer a bespoke menu of collaborative courses at both KS4 and KS5 including:

KS4

- GCSE ICT
- GCSE Drama
- GCSE Agriculture
- GCSE Psychology
- Btec Children's Play, Learning and Development
- Btec First Sport
- Btec Engineering
- Btec Media

KS5

- A Level Biology
 - A level Physics
 - A Level Psychology
 - A Level Travel and Tourism
 - A Level History
 - A Level Music
 - A Level Maths
 - A Level Irish
 - Btec Engineering
 - Btec Construction
-
-

1. Identify the key barriers and enablers for Shared Education

Barriers-

Micro- level (Within our partnership);

We have worked very hard within our partnership to overcome a range of barriers including-

- Establishment of a shared vision and trust which will enable support for sharing in a cross-sectoral partnership (from staff, students, parents, Board of Governors and wider communities) which is located in a traditionally very divided area
- Economic challenges- as our schools are rurally located access to transport (taxis and buses) is both necessary and costly to support our shared courses.
- Lack of funding for essential cover to enable continued vital shared planning time, joint staff training and PD opportunities and team building experiences for staff, students and very importantly for parents and the wider community also
- Resources-With growing numbers in shared course classes, the costs for more ICT equipment, books etc is growing
- In order for a partnership to run successfully strong leadership is crucial and as the number of shared ventures grow the role of the co-ordinators has grown and the time demands related to this are costly

Barriers

Macro Level;

Inhibitors

There are a number of common inhibitors to inter-school collaboration, but one of the most frequently cited barriers tends to be linked to finance. In the current economic climate school budgets are already stretched and this puts a strain on schools (for example) who

would like to collaborate but cannot afford to meet the costs in relation to transport. Duffy & Gallagher (2012) also found that finance acted as a potential inhibitor to sharing between schools, noting that the withdrawal of funding presented many of the SEP 1 schools with difficulties in relation to sustaining their collaborative activity.

Researchers in this field have also identified an array of other contributory logistical challenges that could potentially inhibit collaboration between schools, including differing approaches to time-tabling as well as the challenge of synchronising school calendars. Other commonly cited inhibitors included inconsistencies in school policies and perceived inequality in the deployment of resources (Knox, 2010; Donnelly and Gallagher, 2010; Hughes at al., 2010).

Aside from these more practical issues, a range of less tangible considerations stemming from poor leadership, competition between schools, lack of trust, fear of losing identity/ethos and an imbalance of power can also feature as inhibitors to collaboration (Perry, 2011; Knox, 2010).

Interestingly, many of the components which are listed as potential inhibitors are also considered to be vital elements of effective collaborative practice when taken from a positive perspective, for example, strong leadership, trust and good relationships and parity are all deemed as being features of successful inter-school collaboration.

Potential barriers to advancing shared education in Northern Ireland

To date DENI have failed to recognise the benefits from collaboration and sharing apart from seeing sharing as a community relations function; whilst sharing has a contribution to make regarding relations between communities, sharing can also significantly contribute to educational benefits. DENI needs to pro-actively promote the shared model as a means for schools to widen provision and improve outcomes.

The area based planning process demonstrates the difficulties the ELBs, CCMS and DENI have when tasked with identifying:

“...realistic, innovative and creative solutions to address need which include opportunities for shared schooling on a cross sectoral basis.”

Sectoral interests are also a potential barrier, particularly with regard the area based planning that is described above.

The funding formula is crucial to enabling shared education; currently this is largely based on pupil numbers, thereby encouraging schools to compete for pupils. Some element of competition is useful, but the current arrangements make collaboration difficult as it may encourage perceptions of 'poaching' between schools. If any new funding formula contains some element of support for collaboration then this will provide a positive incentive for schools to engage in shared education.

Enablers

Micro level-

Key stakeholders within the partnership are committed to sustaining and growing their links as they recognise the educational and social benefits which such sharing can bring.

A range of enabling factors currently support this partnership include;

- Strong support for a vision of working together to create further opportunities for the provision of high quality education for all young people in our area irrespective of their cultural or religious backgrounds
- Strong buy-in or support and very importantly, growing trust between all key stakeholders
- Established infra-structure to support collaboration at all levels within the partner schools
- Strong and effective leadership across the partnership
- A proven record of well-established and effective collaborative links between the partner schools
- High up-take of shared courses and good exam results

Macro- level

Enabling Factors

There are a number of significant enabling factors already in place within the current system which support the notion of collaboration. A culture of community networking already exists to some degree within Northern Ireland, as does a favourable political agenda (Hughes et al., 2010). In addition, the geographically small nature of the country could be deemed as another enabling factor to inter-school collaboration.

With regards to schools widening provision and raising educational standards, sharing can benefit all of those groups mentioned in Section 75. Over the last 6 years the sharing education programme has provided the opportunity for well over 15,000 pupils from over 120 schools to benefit from regular sustained curricular activities.

SEP has demonstrated that by working together schools from across the sectors can address a number of issues for pupils, staff and parents, all of whom feature in the Section 75 categories above, including:

- Provision of key accredited curricular subjects on a shared basis
- Provision of extra-curricular activities on a shared basis
- Provision of accredited programmes for pupils with special educational needs
- Provision of key elements of KS2 curriculum for primary schools
- Provision of transition activities between primary and post-primary school
- Provision of formal training and accreditation for teachers
- Development of next practice for teachers and educational managers through the creation of institutional links
- Provision of accredited and non-accredited short courses for parents
- Opportunities parents and teachers from different backgrounds to meet at shared events (Parent/Teacher evenings, celebration events etc.)
- Opportunities for schools to manage resources strategically for the benefit of all pupils

Whilst this list is not exhaustive it demonstrates that sharing increases the benefits and effectiveness of existing school resources for all stakeholders.

The promotion of shared education allows schools to maintain and celebrate their ethos and identity, whilst also providing opportunities for teachers and pupils from different backgrounds to meet on a regular, sustained basis. Through this prolonged contact participants get opportunities to share perspectives on ethos and identity.

It should be remembered that schools will only engage with sharing in a meaningful way if there are clear improvements in educational outcomes – this use of sharing as a means of delivering key elements of provision will ensure that appropriate structures are in place to address the rights of learners.

Through SEP schools have been able to ensure that pupils can learn together in a positive environment, this is because “sharing” is seen in these schools as a normal means of delivering education, no different from any other, therefore normal rules and procedures

apply. Additionally some partnerships have started the process of creating shared pastoral policies and code of conduct such is the extent of sharing between the institutions.

In partnership, schools can offer a wider range of activities, whilst improving outcomes, at the same time as maintaining their individual ethos and identity.

Shared education initiatives between locally based schools from diverse backgrounds, and with diverse expertise and facilities, helps fundamentally to provide access to, and delivery of, the full range of the entitlement framework for pupils. Schools working together in this manner also provide opportunities for investment in shared facilities, of a higher standard than any single school can ever hope to develop, and available to the widest possible group of pupils. Shared staff development activities within locally based collaborative networks will not only allow support and improve the quality of teaching and learning within the network, but will also allow for the sharing of expertise and experience among teachers across diverse types of schools.

Through sharing schools across Northern Ireland have been able to provide a much broader range of curricular choice for pupils; this includes accredited KS4&5 activities, KS2&3 curricular and a range of extra-curricular provision.

Partnerships have also began the process of delivering PDMU and LLW on a shared basis with the aim of tailoring the statutory curricular provision in order to make it more relevant to the local context in which they operate

We believe that shared education can be advanced in ways that ensure equality of opportunity and access to education for all learners.

There are clear lines of division within the education system in Northern Ireland with regards quality of provision this is particularly stark at post-primary when we look at the difference in results between the selective and non-selective sectors. In light of the continued uncertainty with regards transition from primary to post-primary, sharing empowers schools to work together to offer learners the best educational provision possible, to maximise the resources at their disposal; for instance through a collaborative approach to timetabling schools can ensure that subject specialist teachers spend a higher percentage of their time delivering their specialism across a number of schools rather than covering a range of subjects.

In partnership, schools can ensure that all learners are better able to access the educational pathways that best suit their needs.

By working together schools start to form institutional interdependencies, allowing them to make joint decisions regarding provision, teaching and learning, target setting, quality assurance and pastoral policies in order to ensure high quality provision and full access for all learners.

2. Alternative approaches and models of good practice in other jurisdictions

SEP- A Model of Good Practice-

In addition to our close working relationships through our ALC links, St Paul's High School and Newtownhamilton High School have established a wide range of sustainable and meaningful links as a result of their collaborative ventures arising from their involvement in SEP 11.

The SEP partnership between the two schools involved a wide range of curricular and extra-curricular based activities spanning a range of subjects and encompassing the participation of students from both Key Stages 3 and 4. Moreover, a considerable cross-section of staff from both schools were involved in the planning, implementation and leading of the various components of the collaboration, as well as engaging in very beneficial and meaningful staff development and joint professional development opportunities.

The Sharing Educational Programme (SEP)

SEP was introduced in September 2007 to encourage schools to make cross-sectoral collaborations an integral part of school life, creating educational and personal development opportunities for everyone involved (Hughes et al., 2010, p.3).

The project which is funded by the Atlantic Philanthropes Group in conjunction with the International Fund for Ireland (IFI) made over £7 million pounds available to support collaborative activity between participating schools. The idea of shared education within the SEP programme promotes positive interdependence between schools that otherwise would exist as totally separate institutions. However, unlike the concept of integrated education, the rationale behind the type of shared education approach promoted through SEP is perceived by many as less threatening in terms of institutional boundaries. It was hoped that such a programme would enable schools to retain their own unique identity and ethos, while at the same time “challenging the potentially divisive effects of silos by finding practical ways of

making institutional boundaries more porous and developing interactive bridges between otherwise separate institutions.” (Duffy and Gallagher, 2012, p.7)

These views were operationalised in the Sharing Education Programme by potentially enabling students to access an enhanced curricular choice, supporting the implementation of shared courses and giving rise to opportunities for enriching personal, social and educational experiences through collaborative ventures. Another objective of SEP was the creation of links between teachers and school leaders, opportunities for sharing of good practice and for the pooling of resources between neighbouring schools. However, one of the core objectives of the programme was the development of cross denominational partnerships between schools in Northern Ireland with a view to promoting social cohesion in a divided society by enabling young people to learn about and respect religious and cultural diversity.

The SEP team decided not to adopt the standard approach to educational reform measurements which involves looking at existing models of best practice and using these as a template to draw up a specific prescriptive framework with narrow guidelines within which participants must work. Instead the aim of SEP was to attempt to develop “next practice” by giving schools virtually “carte blanche” to develop creative, innovative ideas, systems and approaches to delivering shared education in a way that would best suit the specific needs of the student body, staff, partner schools and wider community of their partnership. This dynamic approach of allowing senior leaders and teachers in schools to explore ideas and experiment with possibilities which they deemed fitting for their area marked a significantly different approach to previous funding schemes. Mr Denis Rooney from the International Fund for Ireland at the SEP Next Steps Conference in Belfast (September 2011), described the merits of such a dynamic model of collaboration as having the potential to create a “springboard to lasting change”.

Research has shown that previous contact programmes designed to mitigate the impact of separate education rolled out across schools in Northern Ireland in the late 1990’s and early part of the last decade, including Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU), and curricular initiatives such as the introduction of Local and Global Citizenship and common history and religious curricula, have had little meaningful impact (Duffy & Gallagher, 2012; Smith & Robinson, 1992; Leitch & Kilpatrick, 1999; O’Connor, Hartop & McCully, 2002; Gallagher, 2004; Smith & Robinson, 1996). Speaking at the “Next Steps Conference” (2011), in

Queen's University Belfast, Professor Tony Gallagher, explained how the growing body of evidence around effective inter-school collaboration suggests that in order for shared education initiatives to be successful, collaboration must be based around core curricular activity and that the notion of shared education needs to become a central and sustained part of school life rather than an add-on or occasional joint venture with a neighbouring school.

Recent changes in educational policy (such as The Education NI Order, 2006), coupled with the introduction of a range of new initiative (such as the Sharing Education Programme, 2007), have impacted greatly on how some schools in Northern Ireland are currently working together. In addition, the growth of shared courses now being offered through the Entitlement Framework funding within Area Learning Communities (ALC) across Northern Ireland have led to a new appetite for sharing between schools. Moreover, this type of joint curricular venture is considered to be mutually beneficial for all participants as it offers a more sustainable and effective collaborative model for schools than previous initiatives (Gallagher, 2010a).

An array of government led initiatives and educational legislative changes have resulted in the emergence of a wide range of collaborative partnerships between schools. However, it is important to consider that as yet inter-school collaboration is not a statutory requirement in Northern Ireland, although the vast majority of schools are working at some level in an effort to meet the requirements of the Entitlement Framework by September 2015. Another point worth noting is the very diverse approaches and depths of collaborative practice that exist within the province (Atkinson et al., 2007; Perry, 2011). Some schools have only begun to tentatively dip their toes into partnerships whilst others have fully embraced the opportunity to work with neighbouring schools and collaborative structures and practice are now embedded into their fabric (IEF Scoping Paper 2010).

Within recent literature there are a range of examples including the Boston College-Allston/Brighton Partnership in America, (Walsh et al., 2000), the Excellence Clusters in England (McMeeking et al., 2004) and the case studies in relation to the Shared Educational Campus in North Lankashire in Scotland (O'Sullivan et al., 2006) whereby collaboration was used as a vehicle for promoting social cohesion within the context of divided societies, and although many societal benefits have been attributed to the increased contact with the out-group in these examples, a recurring theme within the research is that contact or sharing

needs to be supported by a range of social initiatives beyond the school in order for it to be effective.

What priorities and actions need to be taken to improve sharing and integration?

In order to advance shared education it is essential that the schools recognise and clearly benefit from the process of sharing; simply relying on altruistic, emotive reasoning will not lead to sharing becoming embedded in schools. For schools to value the concept of sharing and gain the most benefit it must be demonstrated that there are significant educational benefits arising from working together.

In order for this to take place a number of things must happen. In the first instance a mechanism must be found to incentivise sharing – to be clear this should not be interpreted as a request for additional funding, rather schools should be given the support and freedom to use existing resources in partnership in order to provide the widest curricular provision for all pupils regardless of ability or preference. The current funding model also mitigates against sharing, as it puts schools in competition with each other for pupils – schools should be encouraged and supported to be innovative in their approach to enrolments and how sharing can help address issues regarding competition between schools.

Schools should be encouraged to identify areas of common need and then adopt a joint approach to addressing these; this could involve the provision of additional curricular choice in order to meet EF requirements, or a joint strategic approach to shared areas of concern e.g. literacy/numeracy. The initial steps regarding partnership working should be based on shared activities between pupils, as this demonstrates the immediate benefits arising from sharing; perhaps more crucially it also allows the process of relationship building to start and through this schools' can begin to forge institutional links.

Statutory bodies will need to properly support and encourage the creation of cross-sectoral partnerships where practical. Principals, senior leaders, heads of departments and key Governors must be given explicit time and space to identify key areas of school business that will benefit from sharing, in order to properly plan, resource and provide the activities. Schools will require assistance in drawing up agreed strategies for bench marking, target setting, improving of standards, timetabling, provision of training opportunities for staff, agreed curricular pathways and maximisation of resources. All of these steps are crucial to ensure that sharing is embedded and central to the partnership, rather than a peripheral activity.

Running parallel to this there should be on-going consultation with Boards of Governors and other stakeholders e.g. parents – this provides vital support and encouragement of the evolution of the partnership. It is important to be very explicit in terms of identity and ethos – sharing in no way compromises school identity and ethos; rather it protects and celebrates the identity of the schools involved, through empowering the schools to offer high quality educational and pastoral provision. The role of governors and parents in providing support for this process is essential, as they can assure the institutions of wider community support for the partnership. It is fundamentally important that all stakeholders are comfortable with the notion of sharing as a means of improving educational outcomes and not as an inexorable move towards amalgamation/integration.

It is essential that the shared work that schools engage in is seen to be valued by DENI and the Inspectorate, this will require the shared nature of any partnership to be commented upon and evaluated in the same way as any other part of school business. The Inspectorate should also be encouraged to share good practice across all schools as they see fit in order to ensure the greatest effectiveness.

Supporting notes (pertaining to the partnership)-

The SEP Co-ordinator within the partnership completed in-depth research into the partnership as the focus of her Master's Degree (Collaborative Leadership and Management) dissertation. This study involved a range of research methodologies including online surveys and interviews with key staff in the shared education partnerships across all areas of learning, she also drew on existing evidence pertaining to former research involving students and parents from both school communities. In line with existing academic research, the study concurred that in order for effective collaboration to take place a number of key ingredients were necessary namely;

- A Clear and Strategic Vision
- Depth of Collaborative Practice and Relationships between Staff
- The Leadership Dimension
- Level of trust

Each of these key factors were identified as being existing and strong components of the partnership between St Paul's High School, Bessbrook and Newtownhamilton High School-

Clear and Strategic Vision

- Effective models of collaboration are often characterised by schools which can articulate a clear and strategic vision (Woods et al., 2006) and the research would suggest that the partnership have successfully achieved this. All respondents to the questionnaire agreed that a clear and strategic vision has been established between the two schools and 97% indicated that they had a clear understanding of the aims of the partnership. The leaders of the partnership all indicated that they recognised the importance of carefully crafting a clear, strategic and in the words of the Principal of St Paul's High School, an "appealing vision", in order to engage and mobilise staff and other key stakeholders. It would appear that the leaders of the partnership are cognisant of the need to align the focus or vision with its members' practices and values gauging from the strong support from the staff surveyed. Hadfield & Chapman (2009) support this approach claiming that in order to achieve

the necessary “buy in” from all key stakeholders it must be justifiable for all parties and worthwhile in terms of expenditure of their limited resources. The two Principals and SEP Leaders discussed in their interviews, how they had spent a lot of time during the initial application and planning stages defining and creating a shared vision as they were determined to “get it right” and “create a strong and meaningful vision which would reflect the needs and aspirations of both school communities” In the interviews, 5 out of 6 of the participants described the vision as being “strong” and they spoke about how this was crucial to the success of the partnership, a view which concurs with Kotter’s assertion that a weak vision or ambiguity in underlying principles will almost always lead to the failure and dissolution of a partnership (Kotter, 1998). Hodgson and Spours (2006, p335) also stress the importance of a strong vision in a partnership, referring to it as being the “glue that binds actors together”.

Kotter (1998) suggests that a critical mass of at least 75% must support the vision in order for it to be successful. Moreover, he points out that a successful vision is one that is understood by all key players and it needs to be a “living part” of the partnership. In the interviews with key leaders, participants were asked about how well the vision was articulated among staff within their schools and they indicated that they had used a wide range of on-going opportunities and media, to articulate and re-affirm their commitment to the shared vision. The Principals spoke about how they had presented the vision and detailed plans for the partnership to all staff at a whole school meeting, as well as convening a meeting of the Board of Governors for this purpose. Before the submission of the final application for SEP, both Principals and their Chair of the Board of Governors also had to sign a contractual style document affirming their approval and support for the vision and all aspects of the planned 3 year project. One Principal spoke about how he introduced and began to embed the vision within his school;

“In the beginning I called whole staff meetings as well as some more specific meetings with those who were directly involved in implementing the projects... I discussed the vision of the partnership with my staff and, in all honesty, there was some resistance from a minority of staff, this was also the case with a small number of parents. However, I think that I used every opportunity, when I had captive audiences, to speak about the vision, strengths and indeed success of our collaboration”.

SEP leaders stated that they were committed to their shared vision and that they had already witnessed what a SEP Coordinator described as a “sea change” in attitudes now that people had witnessed the benefits of sharing. One of the Principals stated however, that support for the vision had only “gradually grown over the three years among some members of his staff and indeed within the wider community”. Conversely, the other Principal commented that he did not meet with opposition from any section of his school community in relation to the vision of the partnership. Therefore, despite some reluctance to begin with, from a minority of staff (11%) and a small number of parents in one School, overall the support for the vision was relatively high across the partnership. Furthermore, the feedback from the interviews and questionnaire would suggest that support for the vision has not only grown within the staff but that parents are increasingly recognising the benefits of and supporting collaboration between the two schools.

An interesting point that was made by a Senior Teacher was how the Senior Leadership Team in his school had recently met to review their schools aims and objectives and having discussed the impact and importance that interschool collaboration had assumed within their school, they decided to re-draft part of their mission statement. Moreover, the current School Development Plans for both schools now heavily reflect the joint commitment to their shared vision, with plans for sustaining and developing new collaborative activities listed as key priorities within both documents.

4.2 Depth of Collaboration

When considering the depth or extent of collaboration between the two case study schools, the researcher looked at a number of areas as identified by Woods et al.(2006) including group identity; organisational infrastructure; professional collaborative activity and penetration below senior management as well as considering normalised collaboration as part of the schools’ culture.

In relation to group identity, the data would suggest that the case study partnership appears to have developed a very real sense of its own unique identity. The Principals spoke about the importance of “creating an identity for the partnership” during their interviews. They talked about how during the initial planning stages they had spent a considerable amount of time discussing a name for the partnership which would successfully “convey a sense of their shared vision”. They also designed a logo which both schools have included on all school letter headed paper and on the home page of their school websites. The data suggests that both principals are very aware of the need to continually exploit all opportunities to raise the profile and build capacity of their collaborative work and shared identity through the media. One Vice Principal in School commented;

The fact is that at our Area Learning Community meetings other schools in the area very much acknowledge and indeed admire our partnership and how far we have come in a relatively short period of time. We have developed a very real sense of shared identity within the partnership. PEACE (Partnership for Education and Community Enrichment) is very significant for us and those words speak volumes about what we are committed to achieving together. I also believe that our Sports students in particular who designed their own shared uniform are very proud of this new and unique identity, their jersey carries the crests of both our schools as well as our PEACE logo. Equally however, it's important to us that whilst we create and are proud of our shared identity, that we still celebrate our different heritage, ethos and backgrounds and that is why the joint LLW Diversity Celebration Events are so important where the students get a chance to learn about our different cultural heritage and traditions

Many staff praised the work which had been carried out in relation to celebrating the different cultures within both schools. Before Christmas each year, an event is organised to showcase aspects of all cultures represented within the partnership including customs, dance, music, sport etc. Last year a pipe band and Ulster Scots dancers participated in a show in School A. This event was a momentous occasions for both communities and a lot of staff and all of the leaders commented on the significance and symbolism of this event. One teacher remarked “I never thought that in my lifetime that our band would march and play in their school and receive such a respectful and warm welcome” Another teacher said that

It was more significant for us the staff and the parents, our youngsters were just curious and there wasn't the same sense of something ground breaking is happening here

Many respondents in the questionnaire alluded to this event as being important, in the sense that both communities were proudly exhibiting aspects of their cultural background and that they weren't just assuming a new, shared identity that ignored their individual ethos or one which one Principal referred to as "bland"; instead there was recognition of and respect for diversity.

In relation to organisational infra-structure, the partnership has established over the past three years, a range of logistical structures which were necessary to facilitate the wide range of collaborative activity contained in the SEP projects. The schools have worked very closely to develop a more synchronised school calendar and a lot of time, effort and imaginative planning has gone into designing a series of timetables which contain the necessary degree of flexibility for further collaboration.

The data revealed how a lot of preparation went in to setting up the shared GCSE course in terms of staff training (in techniques for the effective induction and integration of students), the development of a detailed Service Level Agreement and the creation of a new school uniform for the collaborative class. A common induction process and induction booklet has been created within the partnership to ensure that students and their parents have all the necessary information pertaining to their collaborative course and the partner school. In addition, the schools share pupil information through SIMS and they have developed a "Pupil Passport" containing all relevant information for subject teachers. A number of staff within the two schools were also appointed to positions of responsibility in relation to managing the partnership to ensure the smooth running of the collaboration. It is the responsibility of this appointee to liaise with subject teachers, EF Co-ordinators, Exams Officers and if necessary the designated teacher for Pastoral Care. Other evidence illustrating how the partnership have developed a range of vital organisational infra-structure to support and enhance collaboration was the establishment of a Peer Mentoring Scheme which is primarily a student led support system which was set up to help new collaborative students to integrate better into the partner school. A teacher with training in mediation and mentoring was appointed to oversee it. One Vice Principal noted how the organisational infra-structure is developing quite rapidly and how professional collaborative activity between teachers in relation to sharing of good practice is also becoming more common;

Aside from the tiers of management which have been put in place to facilitate collaborative practice in a range of different areas, staff in both schools are naturally forming their own alliances with each other for their mutual benefit. Documents, policies, resources, information and ideas are being shared and exchanged between Subject Departments, Pastoral Care Teams and Entitlement Framework Co-ordinators. It's as if this culture of sharing is taking on a life of its own

This growing level of professional collaborative activity which is taking place at a number of levels is characterised in many examples offered by respondents to the survey as well as from interviewees. Some staff gave examples of how they were working together to prepare resources, whilst some of the leaders mentioned how they were tapping into expertise that existed in the partner school. From the research conducted with the Senior Leaders and Principals it is clear that they are fully committed to collaboration and that they have a range of infra-structure in place to facilitate this.

Analysis of information arising from the questionnaire reveals that approximately one third of the teaching staff in St Paul's HS are involved in SEP collaborative projects whereas in Newtownhamilton HS over half of staff participate at some level. However, given that it is significantly smaller than St Paul's HS this is to be expected. Hargreaves (1992) comments on the concept of "bounded collaboration" whereby the impact of collaboration is restricted or constrained, and as a result it fails to penetrate deeply enough into the school's culture. One instance of this would be in the case of the collaborative practice being confined to managerial level only, and this is not the case in this study as there is a wide range of staff from technicians through to principals involved in the process. Another instance of bounded collaboration is whereby the penetration is deep (includes a range of levels) but that that it only involves a small sphere of people who for example are linked to a specific subject area. In the case study partnership, the impact is wide as the programme spans a large range of curricular areas and this increases the scope for involving an increased number of pupils in collaboration.

Moreover, the data would suggest that support for the collaborative partnership is quite high in both schools with the majority of respondents indicating positive sentiments. In relation to the depth of collaboration, it would appear that for the most part the

partnership have developed a range of organisational infrastructure both structurally and in a personnel sense to advocate and support collaborative activity.

Furthermore, within the partnership there exists some degree of shared leadership but each school is governed separately. The data supports the notion that institutional links have been forged between both partners and that a considerable amount of strong infrastructure is now in place to support current and future collaboration.

4.3 Leadership

Given the highly complex nature of collaborative practice it is a given that strong leadership will be a key component of effective collaboration (Ainscow et al., 2006). Therefore, in this research study participants were asked to consider the role of leadership within the SEP partnership. More specifically they were encouraged to comment on whether the Principals, Vice principals and the SEP Coordinator provided strong leadership across the three years of the programme. Most participants (92%) in the questionnaire indicated that in their opinion the leaders effectively adopted a new style of leadership required for collaboration, some staff used examples to substantiate their opinions and a Vice Principal stated how;

Within both schools, the principals empowered key staff and created another tier of managers to implement and oversee projects- this strategy worked very well and it meant that different levels of staff from across the curricular areas were involved and were committed to this partnership

Atkinson et al., 2007, support this approach, they posit that leadership needs to be firmly located within the partnership with a focus on distributed leadership in order to avoid domination by one key player and that all participants need to feel part of the process. A teacher in stated that;

The Principals played central roles and were very much singing off the same hymn sheet from the outset. The VP and the SEP Co-ordinator in our school done most of the organising and management of the projects by meeting with subject heads etc... who in turn cascaded information to subject teachers and coaches or technicians. They held regular planning and review sessions which ensured that everyone felt included and their input was valued.

It would appear from the feedback that most staff felt that leaders successfully adopted a new style of leadership and they created a new leadership structure within the partnership which staff approved of. Cribb (2009, p10) asserts that adopting an appropriate leadership style is crucial in order to “empower and mobilise participants”. Like many other researchers he believes that leadership (within a network) needs to be distributed to allow decisions to be made. This idea is further supported by Knox (2010) who found that the most successful collaborative partnerships involved leaders who favoured shared responsibility in their own schools. The Principal in one school concurred with this approach he commented that a good leader needs to employ different leadership styles to suit the circumstance or environment in which they find themselves. However, he noted that distributive leadership would (in the majority of situations) be the most apt style in a collaborative context;

I think if you give responsibility and allow them to grow through the responsibility, that you have a much stronger organic unit developing, which is less dependent on the one leader and that takes on its own momentum and moves forward, with each of the new leaders looking for new ways to improve the organism of the school or in this instance the partnership

However, the other Principal in stated that he believed a more “top-down approach” was needed within his school especially at the beginning of SEP. He stated that particularly when the collaboration was still in its early stages, it was important that he managed and led staff in a tentative way, advocating a “small steps” approach.

I was acutely aware of the concerns and misgivings of some teachers and some of our parents and wider school community- SEP was a big gamble for us

He did however acknowledge the need for this to change and that his Vice Principal and some other teachers within the school were now assuming stronger leadership roles. Significantly, both principals commented on their age profile and the fact that they both are nearing retirement. They stressed the importance of ensuring that there would be staff in place who could replace them or other key players (who may leave or retire for example) and the need for them to be committed and skilled to sustain and grow the collaborative

partnership. One of the Vice Principals also commented on the importance of having the right personnel involved in managing and leading collaborative projects;

“The right personnel are crucial in terms of leading collaboratively. The SEP Coordinator has been a key driving force in all of this in terms of making sure the collaboration works, if there were any issues at all she dealt with them, she was not afraid to say if there were any problems. She was off school last year and her absence impacted on the partnership”

Another key element of successful leadership within this type of collaborative arrangement is the need for leaders to show sensitivity and understanding. A teacher spoke about how the project leaders showed sensitivity to the specific needs of staff and issues in relation to localised context of the partnership. There was agreement among the vast majority of staff in the questionnaire that the leaders within the partnership were able to deal effectively with contentious issues and unexpected problems. A Vice principal noted;

There was quite a serious issue in relation to a sectarian incident that happened outside of school, and although it did not involve our pupils, there was some bad feeling in the other community over it. As a result some parents in one school were reluctant to support the continuation of the programme. However, both principals took a united stand on the issue and stood together in defence of the partnership and that sent a very strong message out to the community

The leaders were also acutely aware of the need to get the timing and pace of the project delivery right, the Vice Principal in one school in particular stated very clearly how he needed to move slowly particularly during the first two years;

When the partnership was in its embryonic stages and there was a degree of uncertainty within some quarters as to whether it was a worthwhile venture.... It is vital that leaders take account of the feelings and views of others and that they adjudicate what is the best way forward considering all angles

The teaching staff also indicated that they felt supported and appreciated by the SEP leaders. 90% noted that leaders engaged in regular consultation with them and were supportive of them. They commented on the fact that the leaders celebrated the small success stories from SEP and that this was important in ensuring staff felt appreciated and that their effort and success were recognised. In addition, 97% indicated that the leaders

made staff feel valued and 90% felt that leaders had recognised their achievements within the programme. Hill (2009) asserts that the ability to respect others' achievements is crucial in network leadership.

The studied literature highlights how it is good practice to have a measure of flexibility in the aims so that activities can be tailored to the individual needs and context of participating schools (Powell *et al.*, 2004; Wohlstetter *et al.*, 2003). Fluidity and compromise are key elements of effective collaborative networks (Hadfield & Chapman, 2009; Hanford *et al.*, 1997). The data suggests that leaders within the case study partnership appeared to understand this and that they listened to the needs of staff and responded accordingly, even if this required them deviating from a planned path.

However, there were a couple of areas in relation to leadership which a significant number of staff felt needed to be improved. 21% of the teachers felt that leaders had not provided them with enough training for working as part of a collaborative partnership and 23% of staff felt that they did not receive sufficient incentives to participate in SEP. Another point made by 17% of staff conveyed an opinion that leaders should have given staff more opportunities to get to know teachers from the partner school;

“I would have appreciated more time to get to know staff in (name of school) prior to working in the shared classroom environment as it was a bit awkward at the start”(Teacher in School B)

I think staff in both schools should have more opportunities, particularly at the beginning of the programme, to meet and even engage in team building activities in order to encourage deeper relationships and trust (SEP Teacher)

However, in general, the feedback in relation to the leadership provided by the principals in both schools was very positive. Both in the questionnaire and interviews it was clear that the principals had a lot of genuine respect and admiration for each other and that the staff within the partnership felt this also. Staff used a multitude of complementary phrases to describe their approval of these leaders including; “visionary leaders”, “Charismatic leader”, “highly respected within the community”, “transformational leadership”, “genuine values”, “Christian morals”, “inspirational drive and commitment” and “deep camaraderie”. In some cases participants specifically attributed the overall success of the partnership to the vision,

drive and courage of the two Principals. The Vice Principal in one school noted that the Principal in his school was a long standing appointment who was very well respected and that he has built up a close rapport with the wider community. He asserted that it would have been “a step too far” in building community relations to suggest this type of partnership for anyone else other than the current principal because the community trust him implicitly. He stated that his Principal and the partner Principal were brave leaders who were not afraid to take risks and that this was central to the success of the partnership.

4.4 Trust

Trust is a key component of any relationship and therefore it follows that all of the respondents in this research study placed a very strong emphasis on the development of trust as being central to the success of the partnership. Given the traditional rivalry that has been cultivated over many years between schools in Northern Ireland, very often there is an undercurrent of competition between neighbouring schools which is not conducive to collaborative working and this can create an atmosphere mis-trust and suspicion (Hughes, 2010).

School budgets are dictated by pupil numbers and so schools in the same area may be competing for students (McMeeking et al., 2004; Bell et al., 2006) and this coupled with the pressure on schools to compete for better results than other schools in their area can lead to a reticence to collaborate (Woods et al, 2006; Leonard, 1999). The data however, would suggest that neither of these considerations were pertinent to the relationship between the two case study schools. The trust issues instead tended to stem mainly from a fear of working with the “other community”, and to a lesser extent questions around a potential imbalance of power and an inequality in relation to effort and staff workload.

If schools are to work together effectively, key participants at all levels must establish relationships which are characterised by a sense of equality, parity and above all trust. Both leaders spoke about how “honesty was required from the outset so that they could create a true and meaningful vision” and avoid the creation of what Hadfield & Jopling refer to as “comfortable collaborative partnerships and instead strive for meaningful and worthwhile

collaboration”(2007,p9).This process requires members to engage openly and critically about what they want to achieve, their values, the current issues and problems within their school; there is no point in setting unrealistic aims. Somekh (1994) uses the analogy of *“inhabiting each other’s castles”*, implying that in order to develop an in-depth understanding of each other’s schools, head teachers must be prepared to open their doors to their partners in a “warts and all” type approach. The data would suggest that staff within the partnership are growing increasingly honest and open with each other as trust develops between them. One of the Vice Principal alluded to this, when they stated:

We are now moving from the embryonic stages of building a collaborative relationship whereby participants are very polite but not always totally honest with each other. We are increasingly engaging much more openly and are confident to have the more difficult conversations with each other and I suppose that is indicative of how much trust has grown between our two schools

The data supports the notion that the development of trust between staff involves a process which takes time and commitment and moreover, it requires participants to take risks and to weather the storm together during challenges which may present themselves. Within the research the establishment of a sense of parity and equality between partners were also considered to be vital in the development of a trusting relationship among all of the key leaders. However, the reality is that within any partnership there will often be an imbalance of power to some extent, for example one school could be perceived to be a more powerful partner due to its size, the persona of the principal, or even based on the sector which it belongs to could cause a perceived inequality. The Principal and all of the Senior Leaders in one school spoke in their interviews about how they were very conscious of the need to avoid being portrayed as the dominant partner, owing not only to the dramatic difference in size of the schools but also because their school was deemed the “lead school” within SEP. The Vice Principal stated that it was important to them that the partnership was seen to be fair and equal and that all decisions were made together. In addition, they were keen to avoid what the Principal described as “one-way traffic” which would see the majority of events or projects taking place in their school based on the fact that they were better resourced than the other school.

Another potential trust issue stems from the perception that one partner is perceived to be “not pulling its weight” and leaving all the work to others, this can impact on relationships and ultimately trust.

Overall however, within the case study, the fear of working with a school from a different sector or engaging with people from the “other community” presented the greatest concern for some stakeholders. The Vice Principal in one school summarised this challenge in relation to trust building for the partnership stating;

Prior to SEP the two schools had little or no contact with each other. The fact that the partnership is cross-sectoral and that both schools are located in South Armagh which has been deeply affected by the troubles, with both communities having suffered greatly over the years, hostilities, fear and suspicion of the other side still exist today, so the issue of building up trust is at the core of the success of our partnership

One Principal recognised that for him it was not as challenging “to sell the vision” as it was for the other Principal. He attributed this in part to the fact that within his school they had already established collaborative links with other schools and it was “no big deal” to see students in different uniforms in their school. Another possible reason for the more open and positive attitude to the partnership within this school was attributed by some staff to the fact that they were very secure, they were the bigger school and significantly the area in which the schools are located is very predominantly Catholic, one teacher suggested;

During the troubles we didn’t experience the same sectarian fear as they did living in South Armagh and so for us it was not such a big deal to work with Protestants and to travel to our partner school, plus we were already collaborating with two other schools in the area

Both Principals also spoke about the need for them to continue to provide opportunities for staff, students, parents and governors to meet more regularly not only in a formal environment but also to provide social interaction which could potentially build trusting friendships as well as professional relationships between all key stakeholders.

The data would suggest that the partnership has developed the stated ingredients for effective collaboration. The vast majority of the participants responded positively in each of the four key areas but there were some areas where staff indicated that they were concerned about.

4.5 Sustainability

All of the interviewees expressed a very real desire to sustain and further develop their collaborative partnership. Equally, the data arising from the questionnaire revealed that 96.6% of teachers believe that there exists a strong determination to build on the collaborative work completed to date. Participants spoke about a genuine willingness and commitment to ensure that what they had achieved would not be lost and that after SEP has ended that they will pursue new collaborative ventures together for the mutual benefit of both partners. 96.6% of staff also indicated that the experience of working in collaboration through SEP would encourage them to participate in further future collaborative initiatives. One of the main reasons for this impetus to sustain the partnership stemmed from the fact that “trusting relationships and indeed friendships have developed between staff in both schools” Moreover, recognition that collaboration between the two schools had proved to be beneficial for students in terms of accessing a broader curriculum, and facilitating enhanced personal and social development opportunities, was a key motivating factor in relation to sustainability;

Together we have been able to provide a menu of new courses for students and there is no doubt that attending lessons in the partner school has been a very enriching for all parties. I think this type of experience is very positive as it allows our young people to experience a new educational environment and access subjects which are not offered in their home school. It would be a shame if this were to stop now (Senior Leader)

Some consideration was also given to the need to sustain and grow the culture which was emerging between the two schools of sharing of good practice, expertise and resources. The Vice Principal in one school noted how this type of sharing was very “productive” and that he hoped that this type of practice would continue beyond June 2013 (the end of SEP funding). In all of the interviews the data revealed a determination to maintain the growing institutional links and strong relationships (at senior management level) that had developed within the partnership.

However, there was an overwhelming notion that the current level of collaborative activity spanning a wide range of curricular and extra-curricular areas at Key Stage 3 would be largely unsustainable once funding ceased.

There is no way that we would be able to maintain all projects once the funding has gone. Although we are very much committed to sustaining our partnership, we are faced with growing budget cuts which will mean that schools will struggle to meet their basic costs, so any extra activities outside of core curricular considerations will not be an option. For this reason, we are endeavouring to strategize together to come up with alternative ways of sustaining at the very least our Key Stage 4 collaborations (Principal)

25 % of teachers also felt that the current level would be unsustainable and all of the interviewees stated that due to transport and sub-cover costs they could not continue with the vast majority of Key Stage 3 activities without funding. However, the research illustrated how the schools have worked very closely over the last year in particular to plan for more sustainable and cost effective collaborative ventures, including an increased shared curricular offer at GCSE. Duffy & Gallagher (2012, p23) noted how many of the partner schools in their research study had used the “lexicon of collaboration provided through SEP to create a foundation at institution level” and this could also be said of the partnership in this research study. The two schools have gone beyond the original SEP plans and they have used their SEP experience to create a new, more informed and sustainable model of sharing based around the unique circumstances and needs of their partnership.