



Collaboration not Collision

**A study investigating the ways that small schools across the country
are working together**

undertaken by

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and

National Association of Small Schools

(lead: Neil Short)

Under the auspices of

Laurel Trust

Introduction:

The purpose of this research is to conduct an enquiry into the most effective collaborative systems and structures that small schools are employing to maximise their provision and expertise to thereby secure the best possible outcomes for the children. The areas chosen for the research are all areas of rural deprivation but the research has wider implications for all small schools regionally and nationally. The research is conducted in partnership with the National Association of Small Schools and supported by Sheffield Hallam and Manchester Universities, North Yorkshire Local Authority and the Anglican Dioceses of Hereford and Exeter. This enables an exploration of a wide range of collaborative arrangements in operation currently. Most importantly it will help determine and guide future developments for small school collaboration nationally. This is of huge significance in a time when small schools are vulnerable and under extreme pressure. Collaboration can be viewed as essential for their survival.

In 2015 Russell Hobby wrote a blog for the National Education Trust entitled 'The era of the stand-alone school is over'. In this he reviewed the changes in the educational landscape since 2010 and made a number of comments, some of which are pertinent to this research.

- He noted that there was likely to be a financial shortfall for most schools
- Amalgamating 100 small schools to make them cost effective was 'fantasy'
- There were going to be increasing difficulties with recruitment
- Governors were likely to come under increasing pressure
- Levels of accountability were likely to increase.

To help address these challenges he made the following suggestions:

- ✚ 'I believe it will be a central task of every school leader in the next five years to create a tight local network of schools, with strong mutual accountability, shared support services and the regular exchange of staff for professional development.'
- ✚ Hobby spoke of these being federations or trusts which could include shared governance
- ✚ These processes should begin with leaders who shared values and vision joining together on a voluntary basis
- ✚ The network formed could also provide opportunities for all staff to develop their careers in leadership
- ✚ It could also provide greater opportunities to develop the broader curriculum using specialist teachers across the network
- ✚ It is suggested that these networks should comprise no more than six schools
- ✚ In this way accountability could be shared more effectively
- ✚ Peer review offers one example of this

- ✚ Hobby concludes by emphasising that this should be a decision for the teaching profession and not a matter for government and ends by saying – ‘Let’s shape the future rather than react to it.’

These are wise words and provide a succinct conclusion to the research.

The NASS ‘Charter for Children’ provides ten reasons why the small school should remain an integral part of the education world. These are:

- *The small school is the heartbeat of its own local community*
- *Small schools are assets NOT liabilities. The village school, preferably with its own head teacher, is a long-term resource for the community*
- *Across the UK OFSTED inspectors have consistently praised the family ethos, positive attitudes and good behaviour in small schools*
- *Small schools have a record of achievement across a range of educational goals that is almost irrefutable*
- *Fewer teaching staff in the small school means they are able to respond more quickly to changes in the educational landscape*
- *Maintained nursery schools are small schools too*
- *Home background and the quality of teaching are well documented as the two significant factors for outcomes*
- *Pupils from small schools are better able to make the transition to the next phase of their education*
- *UK inspectors have consistently reported positive and influential relationships between small schools, their parents and local communities affirming the benefits to children*
- *There is a place for small schools as a whole ‘because of their academic achievement and contribution to the community’ (OFSTED)*

At a time when the issues of finance, the growth of multi-academy trusts and threats of closure may determine what their future should be, collaboration offers a potential and ultimately beneficial way forward. All that is required is the will for like-minded heads to come together and determine the future of their schools, pupils, teaching staff and themselves and take the first important step.

Rationale:

The original application for participation in the research project stated:

‘The research will explore the most effective collaborative systems and structures small schools across the country are employing to maximize the expertise within their ranks and thus ensuring the best possible educational opportunity and provision for their pupils.’

And gave as justification:

‘In the light of the uncertainty over the future of small village schools which are not readily assimilated into Multi Academy Trusts, it is pertinent to consider how they are collaborating effectively at present. By examining the various types of successful collaborations already in existence, assessing the rationale behind their establishment and reviewing their impact on both the individual school and the group as a whole, guidance towards the future may be obtained. This will serve as the template for the establishment of successful collaborations elsewhere.’

An ambitious programme was set out within the application form which involved visits across the country to see a wide range of collaborations. After discussion between the two leads of the research and their field Officer, this was subsequently reduced. After initial visits had taken place, a greater focus was put on the following:

- Investigating the collaboration within the PEGS group in Derbyshire
- A review of the collaborations being undertaken within the Kyra Teaching School Alliance in Lincolnshire
- A visit would be made to a small school within a federation
- There would be a visit to a group outside of the above grouping
- There would be a visit made to a ‘standalone’ school.

Methodology

Steering group:

In order to provide an overview to the research and to provide advice and guidance, two experienced colleagues were invited to form a steering group. These individuals were:

- ❖ Will Ryan, former head teacher and author of the book 'Leadership with a moral purpose'
- ❖ Dr. Paul Armstrong, from University of Manchester – author of the DfE Report – 'Effective school partnerships and collaboration for school improvement: a review of the evidence'

and the methodology and programme for the visits was discussed at steering group meetings.

It was agreed that the following questions should form the basis for the investigations:

- Why have you decided to collaborate?
- Describe what the collaboration looks like?
- Which areas of educational provision do you collaborate in?
- How fluid is this collaboration – does it adjust to fit the local context?
- What barriers have you encountered in this process?
- What would happen if you no longer collaborated?
- Do you have any examples of policies etc. which have been developed as a result of the collaboration? How did they come about?

Visits were made to all the collaborations noted above either jointly or by Neil Short as he had more time free to travel the longer distances (Devon. North Yorkshire, Northumberland)

Small schools – the context.

There are over 2000 small schools across the country with the vast majority of these situated in often remote rural areas. Traditionally they have formed a major pillar of their local community alongside the shop, church and the pub and have always played a major role in the educational landscape.

There are conflicting views on what constitutes a small school:

- OFSTED in their report of 2000 defined the small school as having less than 100 pupils on roll
- The Church of England in their 'Working Together document (2014) have a sliding scale with schools with fewer than 210 being seen as small and those less than 110 described as being very small
- National College for School Leadership (NCSL) ran a pilot programme in 2002 -2004 aimed at developing the leadership skills of head teachers and indicated a number on roll below 100 as being small. They also provided a further refinement by including the teaching commitment of the head teacher as being a significant factor
- There are a range of definitions for each Local Authority far too numerous to mention.

For the purposes of this research the OFSTED/NCSL figure will be used as a guide but any school below 125 on roll will also be considered significant. This is due to potentially wide variations in the roll of the school depending on their location and the size and nature of individual cohorts.

As this small-scale research is dealing with the collaboration of small schools within the current educational landscape i.e. following the growth of Academies, Multi Academy Trusts (MATs), Teaching School Alliances and Free Schools, it will begin the review in 2000. This is to ensure that the information is related to the current context.

Supporting background information:

OFSTED: 2000

The year 2000 saw an OFSTED report devoted to small schools. Entitled 'Small Schools: How well are they doing?' the report was largely supportive. Whilst recognising the inherent problems brought about mixed age classes, the problem of teachers who were less than effective, isolation, accommodation and leadership which was less than effective, it also was at pains to stress the many benefits of these institutions.

The report stated categorically that;

'Small schools are equally capable in providing an effective education
and many are amongst the most effective in the country.'

(page 2)

and highlighted the importance of the teaching role of the head -

'The influence of the head teacher is arguably an important factor underlying
the good performance of the school in this key area'.

(page 2)

The role of the head in both developing the ethos and attempting to reduce the impact of isolation was also noted:

'The best small schools recognise the dangers of isolation and are energetic in
developing educational, cultural and business links with other places and
schools both in the UK and abroad.'

(page 3)

The report was thus able to challenge the arguments which laid doubts on the ability of the small school to provide an education to meet the needs of the child into the twenty first century. It provided the evidence to rebut those who doubted the provision available and ensured that any challenge to individual schools was unlikely to be on educational grounds.

Hay McBer: 2000

The nature of the role of the head teacher in the small school noted by OFSTED, had been also recognised in the report by Hay McBer of the same year. Their report 'Models of Excellence for Head teachers in Different Settings' whilst highlighting the characteristics of successful heads under a number of headings, also specified how these were different within the small school. Within the confines of this report it may be appropriate to highlight those areas pertinent to collaboration.

Here four specific characteristics of the role of the small school head pertinent to this report were identified

Developing potential:

There are far fewer resources to bring to the job of providing a rich and varied curriculum in a small school, so optimising the contribution every member of the teaching and wider team can make is imperative. **The head also needs to ensure that staff have learning opportunities outside the school to prevent insularity.**

Impact and influence:

Heads need to hold their own with and influence frequently long-established stakeholders in the local community. **They may also need to get additional resources and influence people outside the school to support it.**

Information seeking

Heads have not only to be constantly finding out about their immediate community because it has such a strong presence in the life of the school **but to seek information more widely to enrich the school's offer to its pupils and prevent it being cut off from the outside world.**

Strategic thinking:

...Critically they need to broaden pupils' horizons by building involvement with the wider world when their communities may be isolated and there is the risk of introversion.

A brief look at some selected literature relating to small schools.

If the OFSTED report of 2000 is taken as a starting point, embracing the changes brought about after the Education Act of 1988 which introduced the National Curriculum and the Local Financial Management of Schools, there was little written evidence before that time to review the nature of the small school. A range of official reports from 1959 onwards had accepted that the small schools faced specific challenges but no attempt was made to delve into these and begin to formulate a response towards them. Specific barriers – isolation through distance, weather conditions, time, money, and the lack of opportunity to access appropriate training highlighted the problems facing the staff in small schools.

Collaboration – a timeline:

Bell and Sigsworth: 1987

The Bell and Sigsworth book 'The Small Rural Primary School – A matter of quality' (1987) was perhaps the first attempt to both review the full landscape of the provision within small schools and to provide some thoughts towards the future.

One specific chapter in the book (pp229 -249) highlighted attempts in Norfolk, Cornwall, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, Powys and Gwent to develop some form of collaborative work largely through a number of curriculum programmes and utilising a number of strategies. Often funded through Local Authority initiatives, they offered staff in the schools a range of support mechanisms which sought to reduce the feelings of isolation.

NCSL Project: 'Leading Small Primary Schools' 2002 – 2004

This isolation angle was further developed by NCSL with their 'Leading Small Primary Schools' programme from 2002/2004. Here cohorts of four head teachers from Local Authorities across the country would meet on a regular basis to undertake a Learning Walk in each of their schools. The host head would choose a learning focus and each member of the team would provide evidence of the impact of that focus following their walk. This process was repeated in each school taking a full day to allow for discussion and decisions to be made by each about their future actions. The lessons learned would then be tabulated by the four heads and then this would be shared at regional meetings. Accompanied by a series of think pieces to provide a research background and with emphasis on personal reflection, the programme also was important in ensuring that the individual head teacher was temporarily provided with some form of leadership team which they may have lacked on a daily basis.

Barlow and Taylor Report: 2004

As the NCSL project was coming to a close, a joint report was produced by Warwickshire and the National Primary Trust entitled 'Small Schools: Clustering for Growth' (2004). According to the authors, Barlow and Taylor, 'clustering' meant schools working together to pool resources and expertise, combining organisation and administration, planning collaboratively and linking practice. It required creative thinking and the willingness of all to work together to make these arrangements work.

The report looked at the clustering arrangements within eight Local Authorities. This gave a clear insight into the rationale behind their development. The following reasons for clustering were identified:

- opportunities for pooling of intelligence
- sharing of expertise
- opportunity to compare practices and standards
- shared ownership of problems
- reduced competition between schools
- continuity of practice prior to secondary education
- enriched co-operative working between schools
- reduction of professional isolation

The 2004 report also identified five models of clusters:

- organic – where a group of like-minded/geographically linked heads work together for the benefit of their schools. These may be of short/longer term duration
- pyramid – where a group of schools ‘feed’ the same secondary school seeking to develop common goals to meet the need of the Y7 pupils
- spontaneous – where schools co-operate for short term projects or to share costs for in-service events (this need not be restricted to small schools)
- integral – where this model is facilitated by the LEA but owned by the members (this model has largely disappeared due to the reduction in size of Local Authorities)
- virtual – where collaboration between schools takes place where there is no geographical proximity.

NCSL Research Papers:2011

In the years following the Barlow and Taylor report, two other pieces of NCSL research added to the evidence about the ways that clusters of schools in rural areas were able to support each other.

The first from Spring 2011 looked at ways in which peer support could bring about school improvement. Here Alison Lock investigated how, using a School Improvement Partner to facilitate the process, a group of eight schools (ranging in size for 35 -300) could enhance their leadership potential.

Four specific questions were asked:

- how can working collaboratively offer support and training to head teachers and what impact does this have on their schools
- how can a supportive group working together, improve the pastoral well-being of head teachers?

- how can supported collaborative partnerships enable head teachers to think strategically beyond external agendas
- how can collaborative partnerships support governors in their understanding of school data, through the identification of key points and the sharing of expertise

Amongst the main findings were:

- ✓ although the impact of collaborative work varied depending on the context of the school the heads were able to:
 - define and refine the leadership working best for them
 - confirm how they had become more effective as leaders by providing challenge
 - distribute leadership more effectively
 - encourage/support pastoral well being
 - share the monitoring and evaluation processes
- ✓ the support and non- judgemental challenges provided by the group enabled heads to move forward in a more positive manner when facing challenges
- ✓ the role of the single facilitator was valued particularly where this was undertaken by someone who had a wide range of experience of the national picture
- ✓ the ability of the group to cascade their professional knowledge was seen as valuable
- ✓ a decline in parochialism was welcomed
- ✓ there was a welcome growth of confidence amongst governors enabling them to challenge the head more effectively

A further NCSL study was undertaken in the Autumn of the same year by John Ridley who investigated how the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of teachers within two clusters of rural primary schools. Here the intention was to ascertain the CPD opportunities both for schools and individuals and the effect this had upon themselves and their pupils.

Following a detailed study of the literature relating to CPD, the following findings were revealed:

- CPD priorities tended to be linked to national initiatives and the School Development Plan (SDP) rather than the needs of the individual
- Decisions on CPD tended to be taken by the head teacher in line with SDP
- There was a preference for tailored in school CPD delivered by colleagues to enhance the learning of the whole community rather than some external 'one size fits all' provision
- There were severe limitations on long term CPD e.g. higher degrees although there were highly valued

Development of leadership capacity through collaboration in small primary schools: Jones - CfBT 2008

This need for small schools to respond to a plethora of government initiatives was seen in this study undertaken by CfBT in 2008. Here the focus was again on the leadership aspect but one which could be developed through networking and collaboration. Here some of the issues which had been raised before the Bell and Sigsworth report were also present alongside the conundrum relating to leadership and management. Time, money, workload (something not mentioned pre-1987 but which was a result of the changed educational landscape since that time) and geography were all prominently cited by head teachers as being barriers towards more effective collaboration.

Four recommendations were made:

- Schools and local school systems should initiate and resource focused projects for building leadership capacity in small schools (with a focus on younger teachers with no leadership role)
- The risks and potential problems associated with local networking should be addressed to prevent it becoming another management chore
- Generic courses (NPQH/LPSH) should recognise the distinctive needs of head teachers of small schools with reference to strategic action versus managerial response
- The unintended consequences of networking needed to be addressed by policy makers

Better Together: 2009

The CfBT report was followed a year later by 'Better Together' – a Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) project undertaken by the Eastern Leadership Centre. The brief was 'to investigate how formal collaborative models might support small rural primary schools to improve their services to children and young people and remain viable and to generate better value for money'. Four rural schools from each of the following counties – Cornwall, Norfolk and Northumberland were selected for the project.

This was a much more detailed report than the one from CfBT and as such the recommendations covered a wider area and had more significant long-term implications.

Four questions were asked:

- What type of collaboration could the schools employ to help them remain viable and in what circumstances is each type most appropriate?
- What specific benefits may be brought to these schools by such partnerships?
- How might sharing staff and resources improve their sustainability and improve the quality of their services?

- Is there potential for co-locating extended services in these schools and what could be the benefits of these arrangements?

A long list of findings were identified and these included:

- ✓ A number of ways were seen by which small schools could collaborate –
 - By sharing staff (business manager)
 - Sharing a head teacher (executive headship)
 - Sharing governance (federation and shared trust)
- ✓ These types were not mutually exclusive
- ✓ Schools across the counties were already engaged in many *informal* collaborations which were highly valued
- ✓ Even so the value of more structural models was recognised
- ✓ All three groups accepted the scope for formal collaborations which might build upon the structures and context already in place

Benefits of these findings included:

- Where more formal collaborative arrangements were undertaken, more time could be created for leadership/management issues; opportunities for staff CPD could be enhanced and curriculum opportunities for pupils could be extended
- More innovative solutions to problems could be forthcoming
- Executive headship could assist in the recruitment of heads to small schools
- There could be greater opportunities for delegation to develop staff besides reducing the teaching load of head teachers
- Federations of schools could strengthen the capacity of schools to work together
- There could be some financial savings from collaboration particularly with the executive head role
- It was recognised that building such collaborations took time
- There were potential issues from church/non-church collaborations
- The possibilities of sharing staff/expertise across the collaborations was a key issue alongside the reduction of the heads own teaching commitment
- These in turn could enable the sharing of specialists e.g. SENCO and/or administrative staff
- There would be opportunities for pupils to work together and the possibility of using facilities available at other schools

The report had four recommendations:

- ✚ Small primary schools should have access to better information and guidance on the potential benefits of different statutory models of collaboration; this guidance should be specific to rural contexts and evidence based

- ✚ Local authorities, working with dioceses and small schools themselves, should seek to develop a strategic plan for the promotion of formal collaborations, including how they might be brokered and supported.
- ✚ Local authorities and Church of England dioceses should extend their co-operation in order to help schools to negotiate potential barriers to the partnering of church and non-church schools
- ✚ Local authorities should pay particular attention to how formal school partnership models can be effectively advocated to governing bodies and local communities.

Following the general election in 2010, there was another seismic shift in the educational landscape which has more of an impact upon small schools that had been seen following 1988. The 2011 Education Act introduced a programme of academies, with the implication that every school would eventually be outside Local Authority control. The growing number of both sponsored academies and Multi Academy Trusts had the effect of marginalising the small school. The isolation of many schools, their low numbers with the consequent low levels of funding had the effect of making these schools highly unattractive to sponsors and the drivers behind the MATs. One potential supporter of small schools was the establishment of a national network of Teaching Schools which were to have the twin role of both supporting other schools via the provision of outstanding teaching, and by offering leadership development programmes.

The CfBT/Lincolnshire Report 2014

In 2014 a research report 'Partnership working in small rural schools: the best of both worlds' was published. It was a joint project involving CfBT and Lincolnshire Local Authority (LA) and sought to 'investigate the most effective ways for small rural schools to work together to improve provision and raise standards' (page 3). Taking evidence from 30 schools, the report also wished to 'evaluate their different leadership models' to:

- Identify successful approaches to collaboration likely to have a positive impact on pupil achievement
- Identify barriers to successful collaborative models
- Understand the role of the LA in enabling effective partnerships
- Place the Lincolnshire approach in the context of approaches adopted in other areas in England and best practice in partnership as identified in research literature
- Identify issues and recommendations for policy makers to consider

The report itself comprised two segments – the first being the analysis of the data and the recommendations with the second provided fuller details of the methods of the study, the context of schools within the country, detailed reports of the case study schools and report from nine other local authorities.

The study followed work undertaken by CfBT on behalf of the Local Authority. With over one third of their primary schools deemed to be small (less than 100 pupils) there was a need to respond to a number of issues facing them. These included:

- The generic problems facing small schools everywhere
- Difficulties with recruiting both head teachers and curriculum leaders
- Problems with performance overall

To address these issues, Lincolnshire Local Authority developed the following agenda:

- ❖ Schools were placed in local clusters, though in some cases schools negotiated to be involved in a different cluster from the one originally identified
- ❖ Each cluster was required to submit a business plan setting out the joint work they would undertake together and identifying how they would spend their allocation of funding
- ❖ CfBT officers assessed the draft business plans – and sent some back for further work before they were approved
- ❖ Each cluster partnership would be underpinned by the schools' agreement on a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on how they would work together
- ❖ Once the business plan had been approved and the (MOU) was in place, CfBT would release £20,000 per school – on a one off rather than a per-annum basis
- ❖ Funding originally earmarked for partnership working would be incorporated into the lump sum element of the funding formula allocations made to all primary schools

It was this basis that the study was conducted.

The recommendations themselves came in the form of 'ten lessons for'...schools, local authorities, policy makers. Whilst all were fully amplified at the end of the CfBT/Lincolnshire report, here only those concerned with schools will be tabulated as they will form part of the evidence base for the research.

- Build on existing partnerships and relationships – partnerships grow out of partnerships
- Keep partnerships geographically focussed – distance inhibits the frequency and intensity of schools' joint work
- Develop strong head teacher relationships, shared values and commitment by meeting regularly, visiting one another's schools, phoning and emailing frequently and welcoming new head teachers to a partnership school
- Be clear about governance arrangements, funding and accountability, and involve governors in school-to-school development and training
- Ensure that the leadership of partnerships reaches down to involve middle leaders and co-ordinators
- Use action plans to prioritise and clarify what partnerships can do together

- Focus partnership activity on improving teaching and learning through teacher-to-teacher and pupil-to-pupil engagement and learning – including the use of digital contact between staff and pupils
- Focus any dedicated resources on providing dedicated leadership or project management time to organise activity and/or transport costs
- Prepare to engage in multi-partnership activity and for the form and membership of partnerships to evolve over time
- Monitor and evaluate the impact of partnership activity

Learning from the Best: 2014

This unpublished study was undertaken by Melanie Cox, an independent consultant working on behalf of the Kent Local Authority. Alongside a number of pertinent headings which reviewed both the challenges facing small schools and the positive contribution they are able to make, were sections which focussed upon their existing collaborations.

These included:

- Small school federated with a larger primary school
- Small school federated with a secondary school
- A three-school collaboration operating via a memorandum of understanding
- Small schools as members of academy trusts
- Informal partnerships between small schools

Cox described these separate collaborations in turn highlighting the positive and less than positive aspects of each example and came to the following conclusions:

- ❖ No one way of working was more effective than another
- ❖ Head teachers were able to single out ‘partnership’ as being the key factor in improving their school
- ❖ Where partnerships have less impact ‘the collaboration amounts to doing *useful* things together rather than being at the heart of the schools’ improvement strategy’
- ❖ Formal collaboration is often actively resisted by some head teachers and governors as they fear the school will lose its identity
- ❖ Often this is due to a lack of knowledge of the different models of collaboration and the benefits which they can bring
- ❖ Executive headship allowed for a greater strategic role rather than the juggling of a teaching commitment/subject leader commitment

Cox was able to make a series of recommendations. Those made for schools and governing bodies are applicable to this research:

- 📄 Analyse the effectiveness of existing partnerships dispassionately
- 📄 Fine out about different models of collaboration and talk to other head teachers and governing bodies
- 📄 Ensure that common objectives for partnership work are agreed with other schools and share school data and development plans openly
- 📄 Monitor and evaluate the impact of partnership activity
- 📄 Reconsider reasons for not buying into centrally provided services for governing bodies and ensure that governors keep up to date with training.

From the above evidence it has been possible to identify some strands which highlight the conditions required for collaboration between small schools and the benefits to be accrued. These will be used as a framework for the conclusions reached following the field visits within the research.

The Field Visits.

Kyra Teaching School Alliance, Lincolnshire:

To best illustrate the background of Kyra, the following quotation has been taken from their website.

The Kyra Teaching School Alliance, led by CST's Mount Street Academy, is a partnership of over 50 schools across Lincolnshire. The alliance's vision – which was shaped by leaders and teachers from across its schools – states that:

'We will work together to ensure that all children across our schools benefit from the highest standards of teaching and learning and are inspired, supported and prepared to fulfil their potential.'

The alliance has been established for four years and has achieved significant impact during that time. Currently, its work includes an emphasis on building greater capacity for school-to-school support within Lincolnshire, drawing on head teachers and other expert practitioners with a strong track record of supporting improvement in other schools. The alliance also continues to develop its work in recruiting and training trainee teachers, which it considers to be a key strategy for ensuring the long-term success of schools and pupils.

Kyra is also committed to harnessing the ideas of children themselves in order to achieve improvement across schools. The Kyra Kids' Council, which includes student representatives from schools across the alliance, provides a key school improvement role, through their learning walks and constructive feedback to head teachers and teachers across the alliance.

Kyra Research School

In October 2016, Kyra became one of just five schools and school partnerships across England to be chosen by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and the Institute for Effective Education (IEE) to be part of a network of new Research Schools.

Each Research School will work to bridge the gap between education research and classroom practice, helping teachers make better use of evidence to implement 'what works' in their classrooms.

Kyra was chosen to lead the initiative in Lincolnshire and across the East Midlands, and will work with its Kyra Teaching School Alliance partner schools to encourage the use of evidence-based resources and tools to develop their practice and improve outcomes for children. The Kyra Research School will build partnerships, bring in existing networks and develop new ones across the East Midlands region.

It is within this framework that the field visits took place. The success and subsequent growth of Kyra and the distance between schools cross the county of Lincolnshire have meant that two distinct groups have developed within the alliance. These are

Kyra West – with schools largely based around the city of Lincoln

Kyra East – based upon more remote schools closer to the coast

Both groups were visited and whilst they both followed similar paths there were some differences.

Both schools joined Kyra because of the vision of the TSA and the integrity of the leadership.

And also:

- It was one way of collaborating without full academisation
- The TSA accepted and understood the context of all the schools involved
- It had a way of working which was acceptable to both schools
- As small schools they were still able to retain their autonomy
- The overall agenda was one of challenge and support
- A range of provision was available to support all staff
- These included head teacher briefings; moderation events; link to a number of national courses and training events
- These opportunities were likely to be further extended through the Research Grant

A key element in both collaborations was Peer Review and this aspect will be discussed after a review of other areas.

Kyra West:

This group of six primary schools known collectively as Centurion came together in 2010. There were two visits in January and February at Ingham Primary schools when the background of the collaboration and its place within Kyra were discussed.

The six schools began to collaborate initially to discuss curriculum matters and this led to some sporting and art based projects. The partnership within Centurion developed more fully in 2011 with the aid of some funding available via the Local Authority. The seven questions were asked. Some key features were:

- The funding tended to ‘get in the way’ and the group were unanimous that they operated better without it
- The focus was on school improvement
- The collaboration had developed from one where the meetings were purely ‘soft’ with no identified educational thrust into something more focussed
- A memorandum of understanding had provided formality to the collaboration
- There was much fluidity within the groupings which allowed for the different school contexts to be integrated
- Some collaborative events included:

- Moderation activities
- Specific focus between staff on literacy and numeracy
- Joint CPD events
- Joint staff meetings
- Joint governor events
- Involvement in recruitment and appointments
- Shared residential visits
- Joint school council
- Art, Music, Pupil Voice, Band on a Bus tour, sporting events
- The only barriers tended to relate to the capacity of the individual school to participate fully within the process
- The 'wariness' of staff also was an issue initially and their reluctance to 'buy in' had cause some early problems
- The heads at the meeting indicated that without the collaboration there would be major problems
- All noted that they would be more vulnerable as individual schools
- They would have no other close colleagues/schools to benchmark against
- There was nothing else available as support network

Kyra East:

The five schools who formed part of Kyra West were based at St. Helena's School. The seven questions were again asked and provided the following:

- The schools had always 'done bits together'
- There was a shared educational philosophy between the heads
- This had led to informal collaboration
- The funding for PRP noted above had been utilised but had 'got in the way'
- The schools then agreed a memorandum of understanding
- Formal action plans were agreed and governors were fully involved
- This included full involvement in PRP
- Subject leaders also worked in concert sharing action plans
- Heads served on other governing bodies
- Staff were shared when all the schools participated in a joint musical project
- Areas of the curriculum e.g. writing were explored jointly
- This was just one area of full participation as all the key subjects together with EYFS, SEND, and some sporting and artistic areas became more integrated
- The collaboration was able to react towards meeting the needs of others
- The only barriers were the lethargy of some members of staff which was soon dispelled
- The collaboration was fully necessary in order to enable the schools to function.

Indeed, it is likely to be developed further through the addition of other schools to enable Kyra East to expand within the TSA framework.

(One interesting point raised by the head visited at St. Helena's came from her revelation that she had trained at least two of her fellow heads within the collaboration. Whilst not fully reflecting the PRP structure by their neighbours in the west where those aspiring to leadership were utilised within that process, it nevertheless does give credence to the small school being a vehicle for staff development. Where there are opportunities within collaborations for this aspect of CPD to be encouraged, then these should be made available. It also ensured the shared vision aspect noted earlier and this may have been a key contributory factor in the ready expansion of the collaboration.)

Both Kyra West and Kyra East saw themselves as being successful collaborations and the range of opportunities available both to staff and children bear evidence to this. The PRP processes provide a formal framework for both groups yet whilst being important they are not the whole story. Collaboration had taken place before that time due to the combined will of the schools themselves recognising that in order to protect their futures they needed to work together. Later involvement with Kyra has provided an umbrella which gives some guarantees relating to their future. This will be further developed via the Research School aspect.

Peer Review:

Both schools were participants in a Peer Review Programme (PRP) largely determined by Local Authority as their own services were diminished. The basic premise was:

- PRP built upon the existing loosely based collaborations
- The programmes were now more clearly defined and structured
- Whilst there were slight differences in practice between the two groups the basic structure was the same
- Through the TSA Kyra West had been involved in the Education Development Trust's Schools Partnership Programme(SPP)
- Training for this groups of schools had been provided in self-evaluation, peer review and school to school support
- Whilst there was no indication that Kyra East had undergone a similar training programme, they were consistent in their approach.
- The focus had to be on school improvement
- The PRP was approached in a formal manner
- A Lead Reviewer (LR – who was a teacher from a third school and thus independent of the process) met with the head of the school under review
- The LR, who had a leadership responsibility, did NOT participate in the process within school on the PR day

- The relevant data/SEF information was discussed and the focus of the review established and agreed
- The review, undertaken by two fellow head teachers took place over one day
- Here lessons were observed, data was analysed and interviews undertaken with pupils and governors
- One of the head teachers met with the LR to look at the evidence and discuss the next steps.
- This was fed back at a formal meeting where two key questions relating to the visit were posed
- Each question was discussed for one hour
- A programme for action was formulated and become part of a 'tailor made' action plan for the school
- Following a Case Study article about the Centurion (Kyra West) PRP the following comments were made:
 - The programme allowed the school to take ownership of their own development
 - PRP was non-judgemental and allowed for a fresh perspective
 - Pupil progress in those areas identified were seen to rise
 - The whole process was seen as being very supportive
 - There was a clear moral purpose to improve teaching and learning
 - The value of collaboration between the schools themselves was clearly seen
 - It helped to 'provide a backbone for the school improvement cycle'
- Although not noted in the Case Study material, the opportunity to act as LR proved of great value to those individual teachers who were climbing the leadership ladder

Peak Edge Group of Schools (PEGs)

Context

For many years, New Mills, and its environs, has been the home for a significant number of diverse schools. The 12 schools, within a three-mile radius of each other, include a Nursery school, a primary with a nursery, a secondary school, a catholic school, a C of E school, an infant school and numerous smaller primary schools. Two of the schools are situated just metres from the neighbouring authorities of Cheshire East and Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council. Each of these schools has its own ethos and serves different sectors of the local community. Many parents will travel from one side of New Mills to another, passing two or three schools, in order for their child to attend a school of their choosing, whilst others come across the border from other authorities. All primary schools feed into New Mills Secondary School, but some parents invariably choose to send their children further afield. The local area is served by two state nurseries and a variety of other pre-school establishments which feed into PEGS schools.

In 2010, Michael Gove announced that schools would be given more freedom and this freedom came with increased accountability. When 'The importance of Teaching' came out in November 2010, it promised to 'increase freedom and autonomy for all schools...and allow schools to choose for themselves how best to develop.' In the five years that followed, austerity cuts to local authorities significantly affected their ability to support schools. Derbyshire currently has a diminished system of support for schools and is actively supporting alternative models of leadership. With further funding cuts, particularly to small schools (DFE defines any school under 200 as small) and a national funding formula which will serve to reduce small school budgets further – it is difficult to recruit and retain head teachers due to small budgets, increased teaching responsibilities and increased workload.

Why collaborate?

As the original cluster of schools continued to grow and develop, a need to vary, develop and strengthen the cluster's approach towards school improvement across the community grew. PEGS head teachers committed themselves to a process of significant change in order to improve their workload. There were no imposed strategies, instead they had 'flexible minds and resources' that could be shaped to meet the distinctive needs and priorities of each school. This was borne out of a strong desire to ensure that curriculum coverage was sufficient for the locale, but also a desire to expose all children in the community to a range of opportunities that highlighted the importance of teaching and learning together. PEGS head teachers sought to shape the future rather than react to it and enable them to meet the ever-changing demands of the educational system. They felt that the era of stand-alone schools had come to an end and school leaders needed to develop trusting networks in order to survive.

What does your collaboration look like?

In September 2015, PEGS formalised what had already been a successful informal collaboration of 15 years. A memorandum of understanding was drawn up between the schools in order to 'future proof' the schools when personnel move on. This formalisation gives sustainable strength to the local cluster of schools, continuing the original focus of providing collaborative vocational education across the area and in addition, supporting leaders at all levels in its schools - with opportunities to share good practice, receive peer support and engage in constructive challenge on a wide range of issues.

Which areas of educational provision do you collaborate in?

As of 2016 the following areas were joint or proposed ventures by PEGS schools:

Financial

- Joint school INSET (increased buying power)
- Midday supervisor training
- First aid training
- Combined stationary orders
- Shared costs for coach bookings/ day trips/ residential visits
- ICT disposal costs
- Joint PEGS bank account/ finance and funding stream for joint ventures
- Joint bid writing

Strategic

- Shared Governance
- Cluster meetings – (Did you know...Have you seen)
- PEGS termly development meetings
- Heads Executive Group
- Governors' group
- Joint HT observations and learning walks
- Peer to peer reviews of key school priorities e.g. impact of pupil premium spending
- HT appraisal
- Data sharing and benchmarking
- Joint Governor training
- Review of memorandum of understanding
- Policy writing and review e.g. On-line safety and absence with communal of Dropbox for all docs
- Sharing Self-evaluations and SRRs
- Website link for all schools

Staff support

- Joint Moderation – all years and all core subjects
- Subject Leaders group
- Admin staff group
- EYFS leaders group
- Safeguarding group
- SEN/Inclusion
- Teachers' Q and A blog
- Joint standards files (to verify judgement in assessment without levels)
- Transition Y6/7 teachers group – to build on pupil prior knowledge, understanding and skills
- Peer to peer cross school observations

Pupil collaboration

- Joint schools' children's parliament – HPKC (High Peak Kids' Council)
- Gifted and Talented days
- Sports competitions and festivals
- Joint Arts projects
- Joint child led summer fair – to raise funds for joint projects/trips/residential visits

How fluid is this collaboration – does it adjust to fit the local context?

It must be noted that schools participated in most or all of the above groups driven by their own needs – inclusion was not mandatory. Heads felt that groups needed to fit into their contexts, therefore smaller collaborations between two or three schools were also undertaken as appropriate and when required.

What barriers have you encountered in this process?

- Capacity of small schools to release staff for group meetings as most had multiple areas of responsibility
- Some staff initially were unsure as to the benefits of peer observations, but have found them to be developmental and now asked for this to happen.

What would happen if you no longer collaborated?

- Pupils would not have the opportunities to experience the rich diversity of opportunities they enjoy within their own schools as budgets would not allow this freedom.
- Pupil voice would be diminished as collective issues can be dealt within a cluster
- High quality staff CPD would be limited as cost of training is beyond the reach of some small schools.

- It was felt that without collaboration, the mental health of school leaders would be at risk as head teachers need a network of people to share worries with and get advice from.
- Head teachers felt that the workload was too great for it to be done in isolation and would leave them vulnerable.

Impact and Outcomes for PEGS

- The head teachers questioned all believed that the benefits of belonging to this formal cluster far outweighed any of the difficulties encountered in the facilitation of it.
- New heads to the group felt that the clearly established guidelines set out in the Memorandum of Understanding and in the collective school improvement plan allowed them to understand their role and provided a network of colleagues who they could ask for clarification and advice.
- Savings were made to individual school budgets as a result of sharing resources and using the group's collective procurement powers.
- Expertise and skills of individual staff was utilised across PEGS to benefit all schools and this will continue into the future.
- High quality CPD has been enhanced in all schools through joint training and working together.
- There is a greater awareness amongst head teachers and leaders in PEGS of the health and well-being concerns and issues of all staff - and a greater capacity to deal with them.
- Staff feel empowered and valued through working collaboratively with colleagues in other schools and having a voice in decisions that lead to school improvement for every school.
- Staff morale is improved and they now all feel part of a cohesive and supportive team.
- Systems and procedures have been streamlined across PEGS, thus reducing workload.
- Teachers feel more confident in their ability to more accurately assess and moderate assessment of children's work.
- Staff understanding of the importance of cross-phase transition has improved, leading to better outcomes for children.
- Sharing school priorities and data, and working on common areas for improvement is leading to better outcomes for children.
- Sharing impact of pupil premium spending has led to the most effective strategies being adopted by PEGS leading to better outcomes for disadvantaged pupils.
- Keeping up to date with the current national picture in education is enabling PEGS to focus work on improving outcomes for all pupils.

The developments within the group since formal collaboration have not only provided the children with a vast array of opportunities, but staff in all schools have felt empowered and more valued as a result. All head teachers are committed to maintaining and developing their mission statement: **PEGS – our sharing, caring community: stronger together.**

Other examples of collaboration seen within the research

Alongside the two examples noted above, there are many other types of collaboration between small schools across the country. The limitations of time and resources within this research has prevented these being investigated in great depth but three examples have been visited, all small schools in different parts of the country. They were chosen as they were known to the writers or from publicity within the national press. All were visited and the seven questions outlined in the introduction were asked.

BAWB: Collaboration through a Federation:

The CfBT/Lincolnshire study noted earlier had mentioned the number of federations within the Local Authority. Since 2000 there had been a change in the nature and style of school leadership to meet a changing landscape. The difficulties of recruitment, particularly of head teachers, the demands of the OFSTED framework and the increasing demands on the governing body had all resulted in a different model of leadership. These issues had also been compounded for small schools via local contexts – demographic changes, declining rolls and the whole question of viability all of which have demanded a change in approach.

One option available was for the ‘federation’ model. Here two or more schools under the leadership of one head teacher. If there was a single governing body for all the schools, then this was known as a ‘hard’ federation. Should the governors wish to retain control of their own school but under one head teacher, then this federation was deemed to be ‘soft’.

This can best be illustrated by the diagram below cited in Williams 2008:

Collaborative federation continuum			
Collaborative	Soft federation	Soft governance federation	Hard governance federation
Non- statutory	Non- statutory	Statutory	Statutory
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal • No joint governance • Loose arrangements • No joint budgetary decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree of joint governance • Joint committees without delegated powers • Agreement on common goals through protocols • Common management positions and appointments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasingly formal • Fixed joint governance • Overarching strategic committees with delegated powers • Agreement on common goals through service level agreements • Joint appointments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single governing body • Integrated service provision • Integrated management, some with chief executive officer-type head • Joint budgetary decisions

Within these frameworks the rationale was that noted in 2005 by the DfES/Audit Commission:

- A stronger senior and middle management team

- A stronger teaching team through the appointment of shared staff, including specialist teachers, better training and wider career opportunities
- Better support and development opportunities for school governors
- Economies of scale
- Savings in planning and administration time

NCSL produced two research reports studying both hard and soft federations and were able to highlight successes in both types. In their 'Working Together' document, the Church of England working party were also able to point to the success of federations within their case studies. Both the 'Trinity' and 'Pilgrim' Federations (both based in the Norwich Diocese) were able to tell similar stories of their development and eventual successful integration. From these reports, several common threads appear – both spoke of:

- 'a vision shared'
- 'a clear vision of where they (SMT) want the school to develop'
- 'a passion articulated'
- 'a common purpose realised'
- "creative thinking"
- 'a flexible approach'

The BAWB Federation in North Yorkshire comprises the schools at Bainbridge (B), Askrigg (A) and West Burton (WB). Initially the only first two were federated but were joined a year later by West Burton. The head teacher oversees all three schools. Two visits were made – one to Bainbridge and the second to Askrigg.

The seven questions noted above were asked but there was also some discussion about other collaborations involving the three schools. The responses are summarised below with all quotations being given by the executive head teacher:

- 🚩 Collaboration came about because of the size of the schools: B = 22; A = 40 WB = 22
- 🚩 All three were vulnerable due to size and financial viability
- 🚩 There had already been some informal collaboration
- 🚩 This had become more formalised with greater school and governor collaboration
- 🚩 There was pooling of funding
- 🚩 There had been a re-organisation between B and A schools with a split of pupil groupings
- 🚩 Early Years/KS1 were taught at Bainbridge and KS2 pupil were taught at Askrigg
- 🚩 This was due to more appropriate accommodation being available within those respective buildings
- 🚩 All pupils continued to be taught at West Burton for the current time
- 🚩 There was a shared uniform for all three schools but each had its own identification mark on the school badge
- 🚩 Policies and procedures were shared between the three schools

- ✚ Training days were shared
- ✚ There was a full range of collaborative activities
- ✚ A cluster development plan was produced with the same shared priorities
- ✚ Joint CPD activities were also the norm
- ✚ Children were taught together either in person or through SKYPE
- ✚ IT was an essential element in the work of the federation
- ✚ Strategic documents were shared on the iCloud either for teaching or administrative purposes
- ✚ This was deemed to be a 'no brainer'
- ✚ It was one sensible way to reduce the isolation between the schools
- ✚ It also allowed for fluidity in the ways that situations were addressed
- ✚ Staff were deployed to meet the needs as they arose
- ✚ There had been some initial misgivings amongst the governors/parents at the beginning of the federation but these had been reduced as the advantages were seen
- ✚ The federation idea was seen as one way to 'protect the schools as they (parents/governors) know it'
- ✚ Without the federation the future of all three schools could be at risk due to the financial viability (as noted above)
- ✚ The pupils would have reduced opportunities to meet with their peers
- ✚ Recruitment could become more of an issue, particularly for middle leaders
- ✚ It was also thought that it would be easier to attract a head teacher to a federation than to a single school
- ✚ The federation also entered one combined team for sporting events
- ✚ The three-school federation was also part of two other collaborations
- ✚ One was based upon the large academy in Hawes and included other small schools within the dale
- ✚ Within this cluster there were no specifically shared policies but generic models were discussed and these were then 'tweaked' by the individual schools
- ✚ The other was linked to the Swaledale Teaching Alliance, a 57-school group based in Brompton.

As the place of small schools within a Teaching Schools Alliance (TSA) will form another element within this study, the examples of collaboration for the BAWB Federation will be given a separate section:

- ✓ The TSA was seen as being fully supportive to the needs of the small school
- ✓ This was despite the presence of larger secondary schools
- ✓ All were seen as equal members of the group
- ✓ The executive board understood that 'the capacity of the individual school to contribute may be restricted due to a number of factors'
- ✓ Within these parameters it was expected that all schools should be active participants
- ✓ It was accepted that there would be different levels of participation

- ✓ Shared training was offered on a range of areas and to meet the differing requirements of individuals
- ✓ These ranged from: Teaching Assistants, NQTs, Middle leaders, Senco, NPQH candidates
- ✓ All subject areas were catered for
- ✓ There was a range of moderation processes available from data analysis to book scrutiny
- ✓ A full participation in PE, games, sports for all year groups was available
- ✓ Formal Peer Review of head teachers was an important element of the TSA programme
- ✓ It operated biennially with either an OFSTED/Local Authority Review taking place in the intervening years
- ✓ There was training available for the Lead Reviewer to undertake their role

Conclusions:

- BAWB is part of a number of collaborations
- These play an important role in preventing isolation for staff and pupils
- The TSA is a valuable vehicle for ensuring that specific training is available to meet the needs of the federation within a more formal structure
- The Peer Review programme enables an insight into other schools

Netherton Northside - four-school collaboration:

a possible new approach towards meeting the needs of the small rural primary school

(this collaboration was not on the original list of visits but came as a result of the following article which appeared in the Guardian on August 1 2017. As it was outside the range of what had been seen before, it was thought worthy of a visit as it could possibly shed light on the strategies involved. It might also offer a template for other schools in similar situations.)

Five heads are better than one:

In Northumberland, a similar common-sense approach is being taken by four tiny rural first schools. Despite ruling out the possibility of forming a multi-academy trust – they only have 400 children between them – the schools set about creating a less formal partnership in 2014, including Netherton Northside First School, Thropton Village First School, Harbottle C of E First School and Rothbury First School.

With just eight pupils on the roll at Netherton – meaning one class caters for children aged from four to nine – the challenge of providing a varied curriculum while balancing the books is an obvious one.

“It just makes sense to share resources and to bring our children together whenever appropriate,” says Netherton head teacher Sarah Smith. “Some years, we only send one pupil up to middle school. This way, they are working in larger groups and meeting their future peers ahead of that move, so it becomes less daunting. They benefit socially and educationally, which is the main driver for us.”

As well as making collective, money-saving purchases on resources such as heating oil and books, teaching staff operate as part of a larger team and regularly move between locations to work with each other’s classes and facilities, as well as sharing best practice.

“If one of the schools has a specific expert, we use them to hold professional development sessions across the group, cutting down costs on bringing in someone from outside the valley,” says Smith. “Similarly, each school has its own benefits for different areas of the curriculum – we can take children to the school with a fantastic field for PE or hold drama lessons where there is a great hall as we’re all within a 10-mile radius.”

The school was visited on October 10 2017. It is situated in Northumberland some thirty miles north west of Newcastle and its location may be described as being rural and remote. A First school, at present there are only five pupils on roll, two of whom will move to the neighbouring middle school in the Autumn of 2018. Whilst the budget for the school is satisfactory for the next two years, the indications are that low numbers following that time will not be sufficient to maintain it after that time. Indeed, there are talks likely to take place in the near future which will result in closure, possibly at the end of this academic year.

Other schools in the collaboration are

- Thropton NOR 37
- Harbottle NOR 28
- Rothbury NOR 80

The seven questions were asked and were used to amplify the information provided by the Guardian report. These will be incorporated into the overall comments:

- ✓ Collaboration 'made sense' as all the four schools 'fed' the middle school situated in Rothbury
- ✓ It has been operating for 5-6 years
- ✓ The head teachers knew and had worked with each other in the past and there were high levels of trust between them
- ✓ All were able to use their own skills for the benefit of pupils in the other schools
- ✓ It allowed the children at all schools to have parity of experiences
- ✓ There was no hierarchy and all the heads saw themselves as being of equal standing
- ✓ Where new heads had been appointed there had been no issues with membership of the group.
- ✓ There were many examples of co-operation between the schools on curriculum matters
- ✓ There was joint moderation between the schools each term with the location rotated on each occasion
- ✓ The deputy head of the middle school was involved to ensure an enhanced knowledge of the pupils who would be transferring and to make transition easier for pupils and staff
- ✓ Maths days had been held for pupils to share experiences
- ✓ These were part of a wider programme which included joint whole group days each half term
- ✓ The Northumberland National Park Rangers worked alongside all the schools to develop environmental awareness as part of the social development of all pupils
- ✓ Sports Partnership funding was shared and used to develop a range of sports usually in one location
- ✓ SEND issues were shared amongst the group of schools
- ✓ Generic policies – Health and Safety; Safeguarding; Child Protection were shared amongst the schools and 'tweaked' to meet the specific context of the individual school
- ✓ Children from Netherton spent one day each week at Harbottle to enhance their social experiences
- ✓ The children from Netherton were able to enjoy a wide range of experiences due to the small number on roll
- ✓ These included trips to York, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Hadrian's Wall all of which were seen as preparation for life
- ✓ Arrangements between the four schools were seen as being very fluid and were subject to change at short notice in order to meet specific situations e.g. a visitor to one school offering to develop some aspect of the curriculum for children would see all the schools

invited to attend. This would then be developed by all the teaching staff and all the children for the rest of the school day

- ✓ Children from all four schools were involved in social activities which took place at different locations e.g. participation in carol singing at the 'switching on' of the Christmas lights in Rothbury
- ✓ One potential barrier to the collaboration were the low numbers at Netherton and the constant threat of closure which tended to make longer term planning difficult
- ✓ There had been some disquiet amongst the governors who were concerned that the unique qualities of all the schools could have been eroded and subsumed into the collective
- ✓ This was addressed by the head teachers who identified the positives to be gained for the pupils in term of the educational and social benefits, reduction of isolation, easier transition and sporting opportunities
- ✓ Parents proved to be very supportive
- ✓ There were no issues relating to the movement of pupils as the geography of the area meant that the distances to be travelled were relatively small and the children tended to stay at other schools for longer periods, usually a full day.
- ✓ This allowed for existing transport arrangements to be utilised to the fullest
- ✓ The likely closure of Netherton was seen as a result of the low numbers coming into the school. At the end of the academic year 2017/18 two of the five children will move to the middle school and no new entrants would start in September 2018
- ✓ The likely impact upon the collaboration would be the loss of experienced teachers from the compliment of the other four schools.

Conclusions:

The benefits of the collaboration at Netherton and the other schools:

Pupils:

- ❖ Less isolation with opportunities for them to socialise with different groups of other children
- ❖ Opportunities for them to meet other adults
- ❖ Enhanced use of sporting facilities and training by experienced staff
- ❖ Knowledge of other teaching staff prior to transition at the end of year 4

Staff:

- 🗨️ The opportunity to work alongside other teachers to refine their skills
- 🗨️ Opportunities of working with larger groups of children

Otwell Primary School, Honiton: collaboration for a 'stand-alone' school

A visit to this small school situated near Honiton took place on Thursday January 12 2017.

The school has a NOR of 82.

This school was chosen following a meeting with the head teacher and the fact that they did not have formal links with any other establishments.

The visit followed the prescribed format with the 7 questions being asked in turn.

From these responses and other documentation, the following information was elicited:

- The school had links with a number of different schools and collaborations
- Prominent amongst these was the Honiton Learning Community (HLC)
- This comprises 1 secondary school, 8 primaries and 1 special school
- Their aim is to – 'secure high achievement and maximise outcomes, aspirations and well - being for all children and young people in the learning community'.
- To this end they are jointly responsible for a wide range of collaborative activities including the sharing of best practice in SEND, G&T, moderation and some CPD
- Otwell also has close links with two other small schools – Upottery and Stockland
- Here the links are closer and more directly related to school improvement.
- The three heads shared School Improvement Plans (SIPs)with agreed foci and areas for specific collaboration
- Joint staff meetings took place at each school each half term
- Learning walks were also undertaken by senior staff
- CPD was also given for senior staff at each school with the aim being to develop the middle leadership
- The school was also part of a Church Schools Peer Network group linked to fellow schools across the South West

Links to Redhills Primary School:

- By far the most significant link was formed with this larger school in Exeter
- This collaboration developed as a result of the good relationship between the two heads and an atmosphere of mutual trust between the staff of the schools
- A Collaborative Working Plan had been developed and agreed between the two schools
- The two schools have thus developed a system of working together which involved highlighting the difference in location and the size between them
- The predominant focus was on the sharing of expertise in order to enhance teacher strengths
- Mutual support was the key to school improvement

- There is a system of staff ‘swapping’ where staff spend prolonged periods of time in their partner school to undertake a range of activities and tasks.
- These included:
 - Monitoring and evaluation
 - Teaching in a different context
 - Learning walks/providing feedback
 - Presenting to other staff on a range of subjects
 - Leading/demonstrating effective behaviour management in different contexts
 - Reviewing assessment procedures
 - Shadowing staff with specific responsibilities
 - Focus on improving SEND activities
 - There were also joint SLT working parties
- There was also a link between the schools as they were part of an Erasmus+ Project which involved visiting/hosting schools from Latvia and Spain

Further comments:

- ✓ The HLP arrangement was seen as being a ‘soft’ collaboration to meet the local context
- ✓ The head teacher expressed her reticence at being involved in collaborations and had not enjoyed the best experience of such arrangements in the past
- ✓ These had made her sceptical and governors too had shied away from making such arrangements permanent
- ✓ Governors were happy to support the present arrangements as they could see the benefits for all concerned
- ✓ They saw all the collaborations – including that with Redhill – as being a partnership of equals
- ✓ For all concerned the raising of the standards of teaching were the key element.
- ✓ There was some concern about the possible conflict within the possible Diocesan drive towards the establishment of Church Multi Academy Trusts and how this could potentially affect the school and its autonomy
- ✓ This is an issue which had not yet been encountered but which nevertheless could impact upon the school collaborations

Conclusions

- ❖ This small school was involved in a range of collaborations based upon a number of factors
- ❖ The traditional link with the secondary school could not be discounted as it was part of the continuous process of education for the pupils at Otwell.

- ❖ Whilst there was a programme of activities between the two schools, these tended to be generic and were designed to enhance the transition arrangements and provide greater insight into the work being undertaken at the primary level.
- ❖ To this end the head at Otwell had provided CPD for the staff at the secondary school to share best practice.
- ❖ With the two other small schools with whom the links were greater, (Upottery and Stockland) there was an enhanced focus on sharing best practice, SIPs, developing leadership roles and learning environments
- ❖ In these instances, the shared context assisted in the development of the collaboration as there was a recognition and understanding of the problems faced within them
- ❖ It also helped to enhance the trust between the three establishments
- ❖ The 'trust' element was the key factor in the development of the relationship with Redhills as without it, the arrangement could not have been successful.
- ❖ This willingness to learn from each other alongside the openness in discussing specific information (monitoring, assessment and feedback following learning walks) only enhanced the trust between heads, SLT members and teaching staffs.
- ❖ The key to the future for these two schools – as indeed for all the collaborations identified above is -will these arrangements prevail in the event of a change of head teacher and other key members?

How collaboration can overcome small school disadvantage:

Within the time scale of the research it was always going to be a difficult task to prove how the collaborations within a specific context had actually assisted those pupils deemed to be disadvantaged. Such conclusions could only be reached over an extended period of time by following a particular group of children and analysing their data closely.

However, as small schools are largely rural in nature and can often be situated in remote locations, it may be well to consider the impact these circumstances will have on both pupils and staff and how they were addressed.

Pupils:

- Social: the isolation aspect/small cohorts/links with peers were met by:
 - BAWB: all pupils in a key stage were taught together
 - Netherton: all pupils spent one full day at another school
 - PEGS: a full range of joint activities were undertaken
 - Otwell: links to other small schools/Spanish trip with Redhills School
 - Kyra: residential visits

- Transition: preparation for the next stage of education was met by:
 - BAWB: within the cluster/TSA arrangements
 - Netherton: the middle school was part of the cluster/deputy head from that school visited pupils in their own surroundings
 - PEGS: secondary school part of cluster/many staff visits to each school/pupil visits to their next school
 - Otwell: secondary school part of pyramid cluster/pupil and staff visits

- Aspiration: opportunities to develop other skills
 - PEGS: full range of sporting activities
 - Kyra: sporting events/'band on the bus'

- Citizenship: developing a knowledge of the wider world
 - Netherton: staff used small numbers to organise a wide range of visits for the pupils – Newcastle, York and Edinburgh given as examples.
 - They also participated in a number of village events along with other schools within the cluster
 - PEGS: a school Parliament, comprising pupils representing all the primary school met regularly in the local Town Hall Council Chamber
 - They also made a visit to the Houses of Parliament each year
 - Kyra: pupils from all the schools participated in a joint school council

Staff:

From the visits made and the discussions the following information seen earlier within the individual schools was recorded:

- ✓ Joint training across the full curriculum range was seen in all the collaborations
- ✓ This was often augmented within the wider groups e.g. Teaching School Alliance
- ✓ This was also specialised to meet a specific need e.g. SEND activities
- ✓ All groups spoke of their moderation work designed to create consistency of practice across the group
- ✓ Policies were shared and these could then be 'tweaked' to respond to the specific context of the school
- ✓ In some clusters the school development plan/action plan was common across the schools
- ✓ There was CPD available through the 'swapping' of staff between schools and also through careful planning e.g. Peer Review
- ✓ Joint curriculum days/musical events were held with staff working together in one school or across schools
- ✓ In all situations there was always support available between schools either for individuals or the whole staff

The examples noted above provide some evidence towards reducing perceived disadvantage. The more effective the collaboration then the more these disadvantages will be reduced. It may well be more appropriate to reverse the question and begin to ask the question:

'what are the advantages for staff and pupils working within collaborations
in remote, rural locations?'

Questions for the future for those small schools seeking to develop their own collaborations:

- How can the systems of moderation seen in some collaborations be strengthened in order to become more effective?
- What strategies can small schools adopt to ensure that a full range of curriculum activities can be offered to all pupils through more effective collaboration?
- How can collaboration support leadership development for heads and all staff?
- How can greater use be made of digital technology across small school collaborations and what impact will this have on the attainment of pupils?
- In what ways can small schools become engines of research and drive improved models of learning and teaching?
- In what ways can collaborations between small schools be beneficial in safeguarding the mental health and well-being of all teaching staff?
- Is collaboration between small schools likely to become more essential in the future if the Fair Funding Formula leaves them financially precarious?
- In order to secure the future of the collaboration, what strategies can be put in place to ensure that changes of head teacher will not result in the individual school leaving the group?

These thoughts would repay further study in order to support future developments.

Dissemination of the findings:

Findings from the research will be disseminated in a number of ways:

- ✓ Through the networks available to the Laurel Trust
- ✓ By presenting the report to all the contributors
- ✓ Through the head teacher groups mentioned in the personal contributions of the lead researchers
- ✓ Through the vehicles available to NASS;
 - Website
 - Newsletters
 - Facebook
 - Twitter
- ✓ Through the national press from articles produced by NASS
- ✓ To Local Authorities for distribution to school
- ✓ Via the University of Manchester
- ✓ To any other interested parties/groups

Conclusions, key findings and strategies for the future:

The following conclusions may be drawn from the research:

- ❖ All the schools visited belong to a number of collaborations and these may be said to match the clusters identified by Barlow and Taylor
- ❖ Some collaborations are stronger and more effective than others depending upon the reason for starting the process in the beginning
- ❖ Where clusters were imposed they were in greater danger of not being sustainable
- ❖ This was highlighted by Hill (2014) where he mentioned that some schools chose not to work with those colleagues who had been imposed by the LA
- ❖ Some collaborations came as a result of friendships, mutual respect and understanding, a shared educational philosophy and developed over time
- ❖ There were high levels of trust and respect between those involved in successful collaborations
- ❖ The signing of a Memorandum of Understanding helped cement these levels into more formal arrangements and thus strengthened the collaboration
- ❖ This extended to governors and communities although there were instances where this process had required time, effort and patience before the collaborations were fully established
- ❖ The common culture/ethos/vision of all the collaborations was seen as a great strength
- ❖ Where some external funding had been available for 'pump priming', this had often been cited as not the main reason why the collaboration had been successful and stood the test of time.
- ❖ The sharing of funding and staffing was of great budgetary and practical value
- ❖ This was seen in the use of Sports Partnership Funding
- ❖ There were often references a stark future without the particular collaboration – the individual schools in the BAWB Federation being under specific threat of closure
- ❖ The benefits of high levels of involvement for all teachers and pupils was fully recognised (see previous section)
- ❖ It also allowed staff to have a greater input into decisions which affected the future of the pupils, themselves and the school
- ❖ This also extended to increased morale, staff empowerment and an enhanced sense of teamwork
- ❖ The use of shared systems also helped both in a practical sense and also reduced workload thus improving well being
- ❖ The greater focus upon using the expertise of individual teachers helped to provide better outcomes for pupils
- ❖ The results seem to replicate the recommendations from the Hill (2014) report in Lincolnshire
- ❖ Collaborations also help to emphasise those sections of the Hay McBer (2000) characteristics identified within their report. It can be seen that different types of collaboration can, to varying degrees, illustrate the role of the small school head in their development of their staff. They also reduce both the effects of isolation and extend the

professional palate of teachers through the involvement of outsiders within school life. For pupils too the opportunity to mix with their peers from other contexts can be particularly valuable both for social reasons – as seen at Netherton and Otwell – and as an aid to smooth transition for those in year 6. The Pupils Parliament at PEGS and the Pupil Voice within Kyra also helped to ‘broaden pupils’ horizons’ (Hay McBer 2000).

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Other information was gleaned from:

PEGS handbook

Websites for Kyra and the Swaledale Teaching Allianc

Acknowledgements:

Grateful thanks are due to:

-  All those heads, pupils and staff who spent time talking about their collaborations and answering the seven questions with patience and humour
-  The governors and staff of Woodthorpe CE Primary School for their co-operation in making the research possible
-  The team at National Association of Small Schools for their support, experience and wisdom
-  Dr. Paul Armstrong and Will Ryan for their valuable guidance and insight in providing a focus for the visits
-  Maggie and Carolyn at Laurel Trust for their expertise and support
-  Laurel Trust for providing the funding to make this research possible