Leading together: Exploring contexts for collaboration

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Abstract
This paper presents small-scale research undertaken in New Zealand, through a range of formal and informal research approaches, to explore educational partnerships and the features of successful collaboration for educational leaders. It explores the perspectives of leaders across the sectors on the extent and value of their networks and collaborations, both within their own schools and centres, and between educational settings. It identifies the range of networks in which the respondents were engaged, the drivers and barriers to collaborative working, and the skills and dispositions that collaborative system leaders felt that they possessed. The research was carried out as the New Zealand government launched a policy of Communities of Learning, aimed at engaging schools to work together in ways that would improve student learning outcomes. The paper therefore offers timely insight into strategies that would support contexts for purposeful collaboration by leaders in education.

Keywords: *Collaboration; networks; educational leadership; system leadership; leader skills and dispositions; Communities of Learning; principal preparation.*

Introduction

Changes in educational systems in a range of countries are shaping new contexts for leaders and learners. By 2015, over 3,000 schools in England - around 15% of all primary, secondary and special schools - were in multi-academy trusts (Hill, 2015), and a further number (800 in 2011) were in some kind of federation (Ofsted, 2011); in New Zealand, 96 Communities of Learning had been established by 2015 through the Investing in Educational Success (IES) initiative (MoE, 2015). These are two recent international examples of government initiatives which seek to harness the developmental strengths of schools working together. Earlier ones include the US school improvement network, Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) and in Victoria, Australia, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) school reform programme undertaken through Regional Network Leaders (RNLs).

At a sub-national level of organisation, schools and early childhood centres collaborate in a range of ways: learners interact with distant teachers, fellow students and learning materials through internet-based links, or travel within their region to access specialist provision outside their own school. Teachers collaborate regionally on subject-based projects or through collective staff development. Some of these initiatives derive from funded collaborative projects: others are self-started, often based on 'natural' local groupings of schools and early childhood centres. The web of learning for teachers and young people is potentially broad, and principals, headteachers and early childhood education (ECE) managers share responsibility for learning within multiple contexts.

For senior leaders, leading and managing these numerous interactions is a challenge, which will "require a fundamental rethinking of how we develop our leaders and conceptualize roles and responsibilities within the system" (Chapman 2013, p. 349). Collaborative leaders look outward, to work with other senior leaders, their staff and their learners, as well as looking inward, to lead teaching and learning within their own institution. To be successful, they need the capacity to work in contexts which are competitive, to manage challenges of time and distance, and to trust other leaders. Through empirical research undertaken in New Zealand, this paper explores leader collaboration, examining the interplay

between the external national and regional contexts, the internal context of the school or ECE centre, and the dispositions of the individual senior leader. As New Zealand moves into the establishment of Communities of Learning, this analysis may serve to indicate contexts in which such communities might thrive.

Collaboration in a competitive arena

Competition within an education market-place is a familiar policy for school improvement in a range of countries (Evans, Castle, Cooper, Glatter, & Woods, 2007; Stevenson, 2007). In a competitive environment, schools vie with each other for success, in theory pushing overall standards upward. However, the hierarchical nature of competition results in some schools being labelled as struggling and failing: essentially those whose circumstances are too challenging for them to survive in a competitive arena. Chillingly, one UK Government document refers to a "zero tolerance of underperformance. … Schools which have been found to be failing will have to improve, make a fresh start or close" (DFEE, 1997, p. 12).

A policy movement towards collaboration, often partnering 'failing schools' with others in the locality which are thriving, produces an "apparent paradox … that schools are expected both to compete in the 'education market place' and to collaborate" (Connolly and James, 2006, p. 75). As experience of partnership has developed, some writers suggest (e.g., Glatter, 2003) that competition and collaboration are not mutually exclusive. Others warn that the potential benefits of collaborative relationships are "undermined by the continued preoccupation with market-driven competition" (Stevenson, 2007, p. 32).

The experience of educational partnerships explored in this review should be considered within the context of a persisting arena of competition. It is worth bearing in mind Glatter's observation: "A key requirement of leadership … is the ability to resolve the dilemmas arising from apparently contradictory pressures such as those of competition and collaboration" (Glatter, 2003, p. 19).

System leadership, federation and partnership

Given the context indicated above, why would schools choose to work together (Ainscow, Muijs & West, 2006)? One answer lies in the concept of system leadership (Hopkins, 2008; Higham, Hopkins & Matthews, 2009), where leaders focus upon the improvement of the profession and its work as a whole, rather than on the individual organisation. Within an education system, leaders build developmental relationships across and beyond each school, focusing on equity and inclusion. Schools are developed as personal and professional learning communities, with a deep focus on the organisation of teaching, learning and assessment, and with success measured in terms of improving student learning (Hopkins, 2008).

Examples of system leadership are evident in a range of national initiatives (see Pont, Nusche & Hopkins, 2008). In England, school federations, and more recently academy chains, have been prominent on the agenda for over a decade, with 15% of schools now (2015) in multi-academy trusts (Hill, 2015). In these systems, the 'best schools' and 'best leaders' are empowered to lead systemic change though federation under formal governance arrangements (Chapman, 2013). Other partnerships are less formal and operate in more weakly collaborative systems (Briggs, 2010).

Hargreaves (2010) identifies drivers which encourage schools to work together. Partner schools find it easier to:
- meet the needs of every student, providing a range of curriculum opportunities and dealing effectively with special education needs through specialist expertise in the group;
- distribute innovation by sharing costs of new development, sharing material and human resources;

- meet the needs of every staff member, offering shared professional development and transferring professional knowledge through mentoring and coaching; and
- boost succession planning and build leadership capacity, offering job opportunities and supporting new leaders through the work of others in the group.

(Adapted from Hargreaves, 2010, pp. 6-7)

A salutary warning comes from the USA, where school improvement networks at federal, state and district level are a favoured instrument of large-scale change. Studies of CSR programmes indicate that "turbulence in educational environments can have profound implications for the function, structure and sustainability of school improvement networks". They are not only dependent upon the will and capacity of educational leaders, but also upon the "fleeting policy agendas and funding streams" familiar to educational leaders worldwide (Glazer and Peurach, 2012, pp. 677, 678).

The New Zealand context

In the New Zealand context, partnerships (MoE, 2008), networks (MoE, 2012), connections (Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd, 2009), clusters (Alexander, 2013) and Communities of Learning (Bendikson, 2015) are all part of the rhetoric in education. The *Kiwi Leadership for Principals* (MoE, 2008, p. 20) advises principals to "create positive links to support learning", and to be community leaders. Advice for middle leaders is to be "participants in a range of networks, both internal and external" (MoE, 2012, p. 16). However, as Robertson (2015, p. 3) challenges, "the policy rhetoric is there – the practice not necessarily so. Implementation plans and resourcing have not always accompanied and supported the implementation processes".

New Zealand schools are self-managing, autonomous bodies directly responsible to the centralised Ministry of Education. However, Wylie (2013, p. 1) points out that the entire system is fragmented: "Our system lacks the national and local infrastructure of connections to share and keep building effective teaching practices". She identifies pockets of collaboration, through short term voluntary clusters dependent on funding for their continuation, which "has not proved a reliable way to lift the overall quality of teaching practice" (Wylie, 2013, p. 2), and through mandatory clusters which vary nationally in the quality of governance and management.

Following the 2011 Canterbury earthquakes, the Ministry of Education used a 'top down', legislated system (Hopkins and Higham, 2007) to place all Christchurch schools in imposed Learning Community Clusters (LCCs). Alexander (2013) describes leading a school in this environment as feeling that the clusters were imposed without clarity of purpose, alongside stressful forced school closures and mergers.

Bendikson (2015, p. 1), evaluating the new Communities of Learning policy, suggests that it is merely "the latest theorised mechanism" to achieve improvement against international measures. She notes that "leading a network of schools is incredibly skilful and hard work… [and] the difficulties of collaboration are easily skipped over" (p. 2). However, she does identify "promising and successful examples" of networks and collaborations leading to improved student outcomes.

Skills and dispositions of collaborative leaders

Hopkins (2009, p. 6) says that system leaders "are driven by a moral purpose related to the enhancement of student learning, [and] seek to empower teachers and others to make schools / centres a critical force for improving communities and the conditions in which their children live". Such leaders have a skill set and personal disposition to lead in a way that challenges the status quo, "shifting from hierarchies to collaborative and democratic ways of working, and thinking of 'me' to 'we'" (Wenmoth, 2015, p. 6). While most school leaders engage in some form of collaborative activity or networking, system leadership is described as "significantly more substantive engagement with other schools to bring about system transformation" (Hopkins and Higham, 2007, p. 148).

Collaborative leaders, according to Briggs (2010, p. 249), "have already established collaborative management arrangements in their own schools", such as shared accountability, inclusive decision making, trust and openness between partners, and acknowledgement of strengths and weaknesses within the partnerships. Hopkins and Higham (2007, p. 159) identify key capabilities of system leaders as being able to set direction (having a vision and seeing this through in action), manage teaching and learning (knowledge about best practice and commitment to every child), developing people (relationships with all stakeholders), and developing the organisation (self-review and extending networks).

Kiwi Leadership for Principals (MoE, 2008, p. 20) identifies a key leadership dimension as: "Partnerships and networks: creating positive links to support learning". Principal characteristics in this dimension include: being knowledgeable about wider trends in education, resourceful in developing informal and formal partnerships, able to manage conflicts, able to connect with peers in other settings to build professional learning, and sensitive to a range of views. This echoes Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009, p. 116): "Creating educationally powerful connections". Here, leaders who create "connections between individuals, organisations and cultures can contribute to enhanced student achievement".

Bendikson (2015, p. 1), in her critique of Communities of Learning, points out that "the attitudes, knowledge and skill set of the leader… will truly impact on outcomes". These skills include displaying knowledge, respect for others, integrity in all interactions and showing personal regard for others, all of which contributes to the trust that is required to lead in this context.

Timperley and Robinson (2002, p. 20) warn against "pooled ignorance", where people work together on a task without sufficient expertise, and Fullan notes that "partners need to take shared responsibility for learning the skills required to accomplish the task successfully", warning that, "unless the right things are being focused on, collaborative relationships may end up being powerfully wrong" (Fullan, 2001, pp. 20, 67).

Methodology

This study comprised a succession of informal data-gathering procedures, followed by formal interviews with senior leaders from all phases of pre-tertiary education in New Zealand.

The informal data gathering followed a purposive strategy (Scott and Morrison, 2007), where successive groups of respondents added breadth and depth to the data pool. Firstly, responses were sought during workshops on the 2012 NZEALS Visiting Scholar tour, which touched upon aspects of collaborative leadership. Participants were asked for their views on leading in partnership, including the enablers and barriers to joint leadership activity. There were 77 respondents across 9 locations. A LinkedIn discussion followed the tour; responses from the 7 participants were included in the data. A further survey was undertaken of 12 participants at a regional principals' meeting, where data on types of partnership, and leadership skills for collaborative working were added. Responses from these initial workshops and discussion groups were recorded in Excel spreadsheets, coded for themes, and amalgamated to identify prevalent concepts and issues. This analysis formed the basis for presentations on collaborative leadership at the 2014 NZEALS and ACEL conferences. At both presentations, participants were encouraged to submit further feedback on the enablers and barriers to partnership, leader skills and dispositions, and contexts for successful partnership. This procedure added 25 more respondents to the pool; their responses were coded and added to the Excel data set.

Throughout this informal data collection, the respondents were self-selecting, in that they were interested in the topic of the workshop or discussion they attended, and their completion of feedback was informed and voluntary. They comprised a convenience-based non-probability sample (Lewin, 2005), whose responses were purposively sought as people with opinions and experience in the topic. They were from all phases of education from early childhood to tertiary, together with other services to children, private consultancy and research organisations. Seeking data from these groups of respondents, cumulatively adding strands of knowledge to the

data-set, may be regarded as the kind of theoretical sampling described by Corbin and Holt (2011), where it is not persons who are sampled, but concepts.

From this pool of respondents, 15 New Zealand senior leaders who had indicated a willingness to be interviewed were selected for one-to-one Skype interviews. Respondents were chosen from each phase of pre-tertiary education as follows: 3 ECE (coded as EC1-3), 3 primary (PR1-3), 2 intermediate (IN1/2), 3 secondary (SE1-3), 2 special (SP1/2) and 2 area (AR1/2) schools. All interviewees had shown interest in, or experience of, collaborative leadership in their previous responses. The interview questions were therefore designed to 'dig deeper' into the issues revealed in the surveys. They investigated the nature, purpose and effect of collaborative working, both inside and outside the respondent's organisation, the respondents' understanding in this context of terms such as trust, respect and moral purpose, the negative effect (if any) of perceived inequalities between partners, and the respondents' own professional knowledge and skill-set, as used in collaborative working.

The interview responses were transcribed and returned to the respondents for verification. They were then analysed thematically in QDA Miner, using codes derived from the analysis of the earlier data, amplified by fresh codes arising from the transcripts. This paper derives largely from the interview data, supported by material from the earlier surveys.

Collectively, the respondents are not representative of senior educational leaders, but their responses can be seen as indicative of the experiences of senior leaders who are sympathetic to working in partnership.

External learning communities

All the respondents in this study were heavily connected with external networks. These ranged from regional principal and head teacher networks that meet termly, to networks of like-schools or centres, such as area schools, new schools, intermediate schools and private kindergartens. Many were in professional learning groups (PLGs) or clusters, such as Positive Behaviour for Learning, First Time Principals, cross-school focus groups and contributing schools networks. Some met on-line and made use of resources such as Twitter and NZNet, and others were involved with networks beyond the sector, such as with business, or outside of the country, such as the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT). There were Ministry of Education-imposed clusters, and clusters that had broken away from the Ministry-imposed groups to form their own. Some were networked through tertiary leadership centres and some made use of outside facilitators to lead professional learning networks. Many found their connection with NZEALS to be of value for local networking and access to shared learning at a national level.

The success and value of all of these networks varied between the participants. Some found their sector networks to be of great value and support. One leader said: "the Area Schools network is definitely about support and camaraderie and just being able to talk to people in the same boat" (AR2). Another considered involvement in the regional principals' network to be "one of my strongest networks" (SE2). One leader felt that regular meetings with like-minded principals at a level that was "more about good-will and relationship building" was of greater value than meeting for "digging down talking about achievement" (IN1). Where there was not a sense of competition, there was more likely to be a strong relationship, as described by one leader who said: "we are very lucky that all of the principals in this group feel the same way about working collaboratively, so we do" (SE2). Some networks had been operating for a long time, such as one that "started when I went to the First Time Principals' training and I joined up with about ten other principals… that was ten years ago and we still meet at least once a year as a group" (IN2).

For others, it was not so straightforward to find a network that met their professional needs. One leader of a new school in a provincial region found the local networks to be mistrustful and unwelcoming, so turning to on-line networks and national networks of leaders of other new schools was a source of external support and learning. Another did not find value in the existing sector network, describing it as "some fat

old bastards that sat around talking about how good [they] were without doing anything proactive" (IN1). Competition between schools was perceived as a barrier to networks functioning effectively: "I guess I am surprised at how competitive it is, and therefore how people keep their cards pretty close to their chests. I don't like that particularly" (SE3).

There was also a challenge in the post-Christchurch earthquake schooling context where the Ministry of Education created geographical clusters of schools to meet the immediate needs of the city's education resources. One respondent was a member of such a Ministry-imposed cluster but found greater value in forming "a [smaller] break-away from the big clusters that the Ministry imposed on us after the earthquake" (PR2). This respondent then reflected that "my attitude about clusters has changed, I thought it was a waste of time, I thought it would be time consuming. My mind has really changed about that" (PR2).

Local contexts for shared leadership

Successful local collaboration depended on a sense of group purpose: a shared proactive commitment to sharing professional knowledge in terms of curriculum development, staff development or provision for learners. ECE networks offered a system where this could occur 'naturally', with collaboration initiated by the Senior Teachers: "the group of Senior Teachers also go around the kindergartens enabling learning conversations around professionalism" (EC3), or by the centre headteachers: "four or five of those headteachers will get together regularly, and they will discuss topical issues or areas of practice that are relevant to them at the time" (EC2).

In schools, one intermediate principal spoke of the PLG established with five contributing schools, where joint strategic direction was set for issues such as literacy, numeracy and Maori achievement, supported by three collaborative teacher-only days each year. Another intermediate school group set up a forum for middle leaders, run collaboratively by the middle leaders. Seven primary schools shared joint workshops for teachers; another group shared knowledge within a Maori achievement cluster. The special school principals were involved in a Learning and Change network project involving 15 special schools, and emphasised its purposefulness:

> We've all got a common purpose… everybody working together and sharing ideas ... as a
> group of like-minded principals and staff from different schools, and there's an atmosphere
> of trust, and everyone knows we're all in the same barrel, we all understand these children.
> (SP2)

This strong focus on learners and learning gave meaning to collaborative activity. One principal contrasted meetings where leaders talked about property and administration with her principals' network: "the people that I work with, we're all focused on kids and kids' learning, and developing leaders within our schools, and so we've got a common purpose" (IN2). One city secondary school principal spoke of the partnership work of their Heads of Department, in a context which might normally have been impeded by competition:

> Our HoDs have appreciated and realised, that by sharing with each other, certainly across
> the city if not further, hopefully, that they're actually getting a lot better ideas. We're
> bringing ideas in from other people. (SE3)

A rural secondary principal considered external networks as vital for providing curriculum for students in her isolated school. Close links with five other rural schools provided pooled funding to access learning from two tertiary providers in the region. "It's 100% about having meaningful programmes for students" (SE2).

Respondents emphasised the need for clear operational frameworks for collaboration. For special schools, this was part of their day-to-day work:

> *The school provides an Outreach Service. This is designed to meet the individual needs of young people who may be enrolled at any school within the district but who require very specific and specialised programming. The Outreach Teachers visit each school/student once per week and work with the Teacher, Teacher Aide, and Student to design and deliver specialist programmes. (SP1)*

Generally, successful partnership depended on well-defined structures and time allocation: for external provision for learners, for joint staff development, for electronic sharing of reports, curriculum materials and evaluation. This mitigated the perception of having to find 'extra' time for partnership activity, and the regular purposeful work with external partners served to build trust.

For some, the local context was not conducive to collaboration. Competition was the strongest impeding factor, especially for new schools.

> *The school next to us had 690 children and the principal said quite honestly, openly to me, that he thought that we were going to decimate his roll, and we'd head to be 350 overnight. So he said to me – these are his words – he was jealous, and that he was very fearful that we were going to destroy him. (PR1)*

Competition was often attributed to the Ministry of Education funding system: "we also work in an environment where the Ministry has focused on competition rather than anything else" (PR3), which destroys the opportunity for partnership: "we had no relationship of any depth with schools we were in competition with" (SE1).

Other respondents spoke of a disinclination among their peers for collaboration: closed mind-sets (EC2), a 'disconnect' between schools in the local primary – intermediate – secondary system (IN1), or a 'one-way collaboration' between ECE and primary schools (EC3). One of the new schools was "excluded from a lot of things. Conveniently dropped off lists or just never put on them" (PR1), and a similar exclusion was felt by one of the special school principals:

> *Someone would say: 'And where do you come from?' And I would say [School name] Special School in [Locality], and then it's like the venetian blinds went down. Because suddenly I've become somebody who wouldn't know anything, because I'm in a special school. I got used to that. (SP2)*

Lack of mutual understanding impedes meaningful relationships. The 'disconnect' between phases reported above is exemplified in the attitude of one secondary principal who offered to 'fix up' weakness in maths at a feeder primary: "That wasn't a partnership and I cringed at that because that was seen as, 'we have all the answers and as long as you teach the way we teach you'll get the result'" (PR3).

Internal contexts for collaboration

Respondents were asked about ways in which their own organisation was a community of learning, indicating collaborative internal activity. Across the sector they spoke variously of PLGs, interest groups, targeted workshops, 'safe professional conversations', an 'action learning' approach to appraisal and strategic planning, mentoring, guiding and coaching, and supportive evaluation by walk-throughs and joint classroom work. One secondary school reported their collaborative work using Te Kotahitanga to develop effective teaching profiles:

> *With its focus with engaging with Maori students and the whole teaching model, the research around what makes for effective teaching… To have teachers' peers who have been trained to be*

> *facilitators go in and observe them and then give them feedback. I think that was really helpful and our Maori results have lifted. (SE1)*

Two of the primary schools were open-plan, offering a ready environment for collaborative learning:

> *We have communities of learning because the children within [the seven] hubs are all the same age, the teachers are all teaching the same level, so we've got quite a lot of networks within the school that contribute to the greater whole of the school. (PR3)*

This co-operative classroom environment was replicated within the school, with regular staff PLGs, and meaningful partnerships with parents. In another primary school, the children led the learning one day a week: "Children don't have a timetable, they follow their own passion and part of that, which has been the difficult part, is allowing teachers to let go of leading the learning and letting children get someone else in to help if that's what is necessary" (PR2).

Collaborative curriculum development reaches naturally beyond the boundaries of the classroom to involve the wider community, as this PR2 example shows. Similarly, a secondary school wanted "to make sure that our environmental stuff is not just about conservation projects and so we've been working with the local marae, with the rerununga, and trying to integrate some of the ideas" (SE2).

Openness and trust were evident in ECE networks where staff posted their self-review documents online: "a lot of the learning comes from self-review. A lot of the learning comes from appraisal - that community of learners sharing what they're learning through their own appraisals" (EC2). This indicates a high degree of trust, and valuable insight into activities in partner kindergartens. One school principal used collaborative work to establish a trust which was formerly lacking: "the way I built trust was by not concentrating on relational trust. Rather I concentrated on turning the school to focus on students, and not on ourselves" (IN1).

Leadership development was a strong focus of many centres and schools, some using external events to extend the knowledge of middle leaders, others using internal discussion groups to share understandings and guide practice. Middle leaders are seen as "the ones that make the difference for student learning; they are the ones that work directly with the teachers" (PR2). One principal saw this work as "shifting [middle] leaders from a perspective of advocacy for teaching teams to leading learning, and leading teaching as inquiry" (IN1).

In the strongest communities of learning, leadership skills were being built which could be put into practice in future roles as collaborative senior leaders.

Skills and dispositions

The senior leader interviewees were asked to identify the skills and qualities they brought to their networks and roles as perceived collaborative leaders. The five most identified skills and dispositions were: being a collaborator; building relationships; having knowledge as a leader; being a learner; and being a visionary.

Collaborative leaders referred to co-workers as a "team", of the need for coherence, and of "building a lot of professional capital between [them]" (PR2). An ECE leader described "trying to create that real open, safe, collaborative, sharing culture… for teachers to grow and learn" (EC1), with a view to developing "collaborative thinkers" in her centre. This was done through "setting goals and inquiries openly together as a team and in a collaborative forum", while in another setting, planning was "done on Google sites so everybody is always looking at everyone's planning and commenting on it" (AR2).

Collaborators talked about the importance of links beyond their centres and schools. One leader described "working with the community and community engagement" (PR1), and another said: "I see the value of crossing from Executive into Governance, to give a broader view of the mechanisms of institutions, also to have influence over other institutions" (EC3). The value of linking with other schools was realised by one cluster member who said: "I see there is a huge amount of potential in getting together, sharing ideas, supporting each other and

then heading off in a direction with the same aim" (PR2). As one leader reflected: "you learn a lot from cross pollination . . . you can't be an island unto yourself" (PR3).

Leaders with the disposition to be collaborators found challenges in the landscape in which they work. Traditional positional power structures in educational settings can create a barrier to true collaboration. One leader stated that: "I think that hierarchy creates those 'oh well, I'm just a teacher', or 'I'm just the headteacher' [mindsets]" (EC2). Another felt competition between schools was a barrier to genuine collaboration, describing principal meetings where "we don't share so much as try to sit in the same room and get information" (SE3). Resistance within leadership teams can also be a challenge for collaborative leaders, as one respondent reflected: "We've got one guy who's resistant to change at every point, and that is quite hard to manage… but that's the nature of leadership, isn't it?" (SE3).

Relationship building was another key competency identified by respondents. They recognised the vital relationships within the leader's immediate team – the senior leaders of the school or centre. One leader said: "leadership teams are a crucial relationship, it is the glue that holds the thing together" (PR3), while another reflected: "principals have to have coherent SLTs; it would be a hell of a job if you didn't" (SE1). Relationships between other principals and centre leaders were also essential at a personal as well as professional level. One respondent appreciated that: "I've grown really close to those principals in that cluster, we have a real camaraderie and a real connection" (PR2), while another valued a network where "we enjoy spending time [together], there is a lot of playfulness, and also the more serious conversations that we have" (EC1). On the value of building relationships with other leaders, one respondent reflected: "it's a hiding to nothing if you don't have good relationships with those people" (SE1).

Several respondents felt that a key skill they brought to their networks was their knowledge and experience as educational leaders. They gained this through being readers, researchers and published writers themselves, and through specialist experience such as in formative assessment or as beginning principal mentors. One reflected that what he could bring was "some wisdom… I've been in this job 35 years as principal" (PR3).

A fourth competency identified by these leaders was that of being continual learners, seeking "a broader range of ideas…and different perspectives" (EC2). One respondent felt that "role modelling ongoing learning for myself is vital if you are asking your colleagues to be involved in the same" (EC1), and another learnt alongside his senior leadership team through a leadership mentor: "he's been coming in and meeting with the SLT, so we've had an outside appraisal and all three of us has had the same appraiser" (PR3). One only joined leadership networks if "they've got a learning focus" (PR1). This primary principal reflected that the value in a learning network is that "I find as a leader in a school, I spend most of my time giving out, and to get some input is really important" (PR1).

The fifth significant disposition of the networked leader is the capacity to lead with vision. Examples were given of explicit collaborative values, shared strategies for student outcomes, expectations of cross-sector professional learning, moral purpose around the community's needs, and a desire to work outside of imposed competitive and hierarchical models of education. A secondary school leader stated her vision for collaboration among educational leaders: "we've got to link arms, right across the nation" (SE3).

Discussion

This paper set out to explore collaboration among educational leaders, examining through the perceptions of respondents the interplay between their external national and regional contexts, the internal context of their own school or ECE centre, and the skills and dispositions of the individual senior leader.

The outcomes of this research indicate that New Zealand's educational leaders are widely networked, and that the nature and purpose of leader collaborations are greatly varied. Some leaders

already collaborate at a system level (Hopkins, 2008; Higham et al., 2009), driven by their moral purpose of raising student achievement across their community. Others find like-minded leaders with whom to connect for personal and professional support and learning, with varying degrees of actual educational value (Timperley & Robinson, 2002; Fullan, 2001). Many networks exist because they provide access to funding and resources for a finite period, and others exist because they have been instructed to (Alexander, 2013). In a national education system that has been established on principles of self-management and autonomy, and that has evolved through policy as a highly competitive market over the past three decades (Wylie, 2013), it is remarkable that leaders have managed to find ways to work together with such success, but it is also a challenging environment in which to bring about a shift to collaboration at policy level. It is to be expected that there will be suspicion and resistance to state interference in what has been naturally occurring within and between schools, early childhood centres and communities already. It is to be hoped that the best of what the leaders in this study identify as successful contexts for collaboration will be what eventuates in New Zealand's emerging policy for Communities of Learning.

Strong collaborations identified through this research included the following characteristics:

- They have a learning or inquiry focus.
- They lead to shared student outcome goals.
- They are self directed and voluntary to join.
- They have clear frameworks for their operations.
- All partners are accountable to the outcomes of the goals.
- The collaboration is reciprocal in its benefit for all partners.
- The collaboration draws on external resources such as specialist experts, tertiary advisors, whanau and community.

A clear message from the participants in this research is that flexibility to design the local context for the collaboration is essential to its success. Leaders know what they need for their own communities, and who can help them to achieve this. There is not a 'one size fits all' solution in such a diverse educational context as New Zealand's (Wylie, 2013), where 'like' schools wishing to work together, such as area schools or new schools, are geographically separated, or where a history of competition between schools means that geographical proximity does not correlate to a natural collaboration context. Navigating the move towards a more collaborative way of working from the foundations of a competitive system is a challenge that leaders will need to face (Glatter, 2003; Wylie, 2013) and to which policy makers need to give time and support. Such support might include enabling networks to select their own outside facilitator (Bendikson, 2015), developing a framework for collaborative leadership (Robertson, 2015; Wenmoth, 2015), and empowering network members to establish their own criteria for success.

It could be said that the strength and success of any of these networks can be attributed to the individual leader's inclination to be collaborative in the first instance, and to the skills and dispositions that the collaborative leader brings to the various network contexts. The leaders in this project indicated that they had established collaborative practices within their own schools and centres (Briggs, 2010, p. 249), including shared appraisal models, professional learning groups, and student and whanau partnerships. The skills and dispositions of the collaborative leader as identified through this research (inclination to collaborate, relationship builder, knowledge, being a learner, and being a visionary) are evident in the literature (Hopkins and Higham, 2007; Bendikson, 2015). It seems that these skills and dispositions are enacted first within the leader's immediate context (school or centre), and that this influences the strength of their external networking. Those for whom the features (above) of a strong collaboration are established within the school or centre are likely to seek these features in the contexts of local and national systems.

Conclusion

It is important to build the capacity for New Zealand's educational leaders to be powerfully connected, in order to bring about shifts in student achievement by working in educational communities and systems. Schools and centres cannot serve their communities effectively as individual 'islands'. In order to develop individual and collective capacity, middle leadership and principal preparation needs to provide more than rhetoric about collaboration. We need to see a framework for what 'educationally powerful connections' might look like, and provide the resources to support both emerging and established leaders in developing the skills and dispositions to collaborate. To this end, the National Aspiring Principals Programme (Robertson, 2015) is providing such a starting point for those who are accessing this programme. Established networks for principals and centre leaders need to move themselves from an (albeit important) personal and professional support environment to a more robust space for collaborative action, modelling the organisational features of a successful context for collaboration. At national level, the development of Communities of Learning would benefit from continued policy input from educational leaders, especially around the need for flexibility to develop local contexts for successful collaborations. This research indicates that Communities of Learning will be most successful when made up of leaders who already demonstrate the skills and dispositions of successful collaborators, and whose own schools are collaborative environments. Importantly, they will be successful where they have a clear learning-focused purpose, with goals and operational frameworks conceived and carried through by the participants themselves.

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