Journal of Research in Rural Education, Winter, 1998, Vol. 14, No. 3, 161-171

Small Primary Schools in Rural Wales: Frameworks of Collaboration

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This paper discusses the ways in which small rural schools in Wales are collaborating, and how such collaboration is supported by the education authorities. We describe how recent legislation has led to the reorganisation of education authorities in Wales and how this, together with new demands and reduced resources in turn, has affected their support for small rural schools. These schools have in the past belonged to geographically determined groupings, and in-service training for teachers has taken place through these groupings. We show how five of the new education authorities have met their responsibilities to small rural schools through different models of support for collaboration. Three frameworks are identified, which reveal different degrees of structure and control of school groupings and their agendas. The relative effectiveness of these frameworks in providing for teachers training needs is discussed, and our general conclusion is that freedom and teacher ownership within a defined overall structure is most effective.

Rural Wales covers much of the north, west, and middle section of the country where the population is more sparse and the Welsh language more predominant. Approximately one third of the 1700 primary schools in Wales—those serving children between 5 and 11 years of age—are located in this region. Most of these can be classified as small schools, the majority having fewer than 100 pupils with almost one sixth having 50 pupils or less. These schools have to cater for mixed age and ability in one class, and they also have to use two languages, Welsh and English, in the teaching situation.

The educational debate surrounding small rural schools in Wales concerns such issues as costs, resources, professional isolation, the ability to deliver the curriculum, and the threat of closure and amalgamation. These issues, which are explored elsewhere (Central Advisory Council for Education [Wales], 1967; Webster, 1991; Williams & Thorpe, 1997a), keep surfacing in the face of changing national and local attitudes. The training challenge faced by small schools with the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1989 was met through inter-school collaboration, known as "clustering." In addition to facilitating the professional development of teachers, rural schools collaborated to develop curriculum material and policy documents, and cooperated on joint activities and innovations (Williams & Thorpe, 1997a).

The local education authorities (LEAs)[1] in rural Wales had a powerful influence over this inter-school collaboration. The LEAs were able to foster such collaboration through measures including financial support, advisory support, administrative support, and the provision of professional development on an inter-school, "cluster" basis. Through the 1980s and early 1990s, successive legislation by the conservative government led to a change in role and decrease of power for the education authorities, with the consequence that choice over in-service training provision was devolved to the schools and a market place was created. In Wales, this was followed in 1996 by reorganisation in local government that created smaller education authorities with less capacity to make use of economies of scale. As a result, new models of collaboration and support emerged as both the education authorities and schools adapted to the new situation.

This article examines the process of adaption in the education authorities in Wales. The study follows earlier research on the in-service education of teachers in small schools in Wales (Williams, Thorpe, & James, 1995; Williams & Thorpe 1997a, 1997b), which found that collaborative practice amongst small schools was widespread and deemed essential by both providers and receivers of inservice education. This earlier research also found that the extent of collaboration was linked to the mode of leadership, and to the size and location of the cooperating schools.

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[1]Throughout this article, the local education authority is referred to as LEA, or education authority, and is the authority responsible to the democratically elected local government body. This body is usually a city, town, borough, or county council, and is broadly equivalent to the district board in the United States. Locally elected representatives are called councillors, and some or all of them form the local education committee that runs the LEA.

In this article, we identify three different models of education authority governance and support, and use interview evidence from eleven groups of schools spread over five rural authorities to illustrate the different ways in which the authorities support collaboration. We also identify factors that influence the success of inter-school collaboration and shifts in forms of, and focus for, collaboration that have come about in response to the "new managerialism." We argue that more successful collaborations occur amongst schools when there is an involvement at both headteacher and teacher level within the collaborating schools, when LEA support is through a staff member dedicated to that group of schools, and when the support is through a "civic association" framework involving a collaborative and consultative partnership (Giddens, 1994, cited in Radnor, Ball, & Vincent, 1997, pp. 208-209). This is in contrast to a "civic provider" model or a more open-market approach where inter-school competition for pupils predominates.

Background

The Changing Role and Power of Education Authorities

Over recent years, initiatives have taken place in a number of countries aimed at restructuring education to promote devolution and choice through dismantling centralised bureaucracies and developing a market in the provision of educational services. (See Power, Halpin, & Whitty, 1997, for an international comparison of "new managerialism.") Education in England and Wales has been at the forefront of the new managerialism movement, and LEAs in particular have been the target for much of this reform. This is because their position is perceived by new right conservatism as being "between the state and the individual," along with other intermediate institutions such as trade unions and professional organisations (Tomlinson, 1993). Tomlinson maps the changing role of the LEAs from 1965 to 1992 and identifies two sets of forces at work: (a) the positive determination of the new right government, and (b) the weakness and failings of some LEAs, which, together with the lack of independent constitutional status of the LEAs, led to their demise.

Since the early 1980s, the successive legislation that disempowered the LEAs introduced many of the principles of new managerialism (see Pollit, 1993). Fairley and Patterson (1995) examine similar changes in Scotland and characterise new managerialism to include an emphasis on competition, opting out, choice-based governance, accountability and the customer, and value for money. In addition to ideology, they identify factors that have popularised these changes: the alleged bureaucracy of LEAs, councillors' frustration, articulate users, and the influence of business schools in changing perceptions of management practice.

The legislation introducing these changes in England and Wales included imposition of financial constraints such as the block grant and Education Support Grants. These followed the 1981 and 1984 Education Acts, which imposed "grant related expenditure" and thereby central control. In 1984, the amount of money available to local authorities through rates, a local property tax which was the only source of revenue local councils could raise themselves, was limited through "rate capping" legislation. In 1988, the introduction of Local Management of Schools (site-based management in the United States) devolved the bulk of funding directly to the schools. Other legislation removed power by (a) increasing parental and local influences in the governance of schools (the 1986 Education Act), (b) removing further education—education of 16- to 18-year-olds in colleges—and higher education from the remit of the education authorities (the 1988 and 1992 Education Acts), and (c) introducing market forces to schools through the creation of open enrolment and by providing the opportunity for schools to opt out of authority control to become "grant maintained" schools funded directly by government in a similar way to charter schools in the United States.

By 1993, an open market in provision of educational support services was introduced, and education authorities were forced into the marketplace to earn the bulk of their revenue through sales of services to schools. Heller and Edwards (1992, p. 65) view some of the earlier legislation as being a direct consequence of a "revolution in government inspired by the radical right," with even the 1988 introduction of the National Curriculum being implicated in that it provides a "benchmark" for the market through assessment and testing.

Whilst many argue strongly against new managerialism in education (e.g., Smyth, 1993), there are few who wish for a return to the earlier situation. A middle path is advocated by some (e.g., Fairley & Paterson, 1995; Strain, 1993), in which "neither mechanistic management nor the free hand of a deregulated, though publicly financed market, replace human virtues . . . as the principle of good management" (Strain, 1993, p. 203).

There are reports of support for some aspects of new managerialism amongst many headteachers (principals in the U.S.), particularly for those relating to devolution of power through LMS. Typical is that of Levacic (1992), who, in an interim review of the impact of LMS, reports that

> [o]f the sample of schools we are presently studying, all, except the smallest, are coping well, despite apparently tight budgets and poor financial monitoring information. . . . [T]he headteachers largely welcome the enhanced scope for decision making. (p. 28)

Later studies support this view, but stress that headteachers "wanted to work with the reformed LEAs rather than as free-standing institutions" (Grace, 1995, p. 129), and that whilst there was "no wish to return to the former system," the LEA "continued to play an important role" (Busher & Hodgkinson, 1996, p. 62). Headteachers studied by Grace (1995, p. 12) "stressed the need for local authorities which were more responsive to school needs, which were quicker to respond to such needs, and which were less bureaucratic in operation."

It is against this background that education authorities in England and Wales recast their role by forming agencies to provide services and professional development to compete against other providers in the market place for the funding delegated to schools. In addition, education authorities in Wales had the extra burden of preparing for the reorganisation of local government, which was to take place in April 1996, and planning for provision of services by the new, smaller authorities.

Local Government Reorganisation in Wales (LGR)

LGR involved disaggregation of eight large counties into 22 smaller unitary authorities with corresponding LEAs. It involved the removal of a tier of local government to create single, unitary authorities responsible for a range of services including education. The rationale appears to have stemmed from the changed power relationship where the education authority was perceived to no longer need such economies of scale, as many of their functions were now devolved to schools. It was either viewed as a further devolution of power, allowing a holistic approach to services on a community level, or as a further attack on local authorities that diluted their powers and further reduced their capacity for strategic planning. Major concerns were expressed by certain LEA officers over a likely poverty of resources and an inability to provide a sufficient range of advisers and services (see David, 1994; Humphreys, 1995). Education officers in Scotland envisaged similar problems, and the Director of Education for Strathclyde identified his concerns in which he applied the lessons learned from the disaggregation of the Inner London Education Authority to the break up of Strathclyde Regional Council (Pignatelli, 1993). The difficulties identified in the document include loss of expertise and services arising from lack of cross-borough activities; additional administrative costs and increased bureaucracy arising from the absence of economies of scale; staffing difficulties; loss of capacity for strategic planning; and budget difficulties arising from a major reduction in educational spending linked to increased bureaucratic costs.

These worries were compounded by the fact that this reorganisation was imposed on Wales and Scotland without regard for the need for local support. In contrast, in England such support was deemed necessary by the head of the Local Government Commission, Sir John Banham: "it is a massive gamble which I am only prepared to recommend where there is strong local support" (cited in Budge, 1994, p. 9). This does not mean that support for the change was not there on the ground in Wales, only that it was not taken into account. Indeed Fletcher (1995), in a case study of the process in one new authority, describes an incongruence between the enthusiasm displayed by those in the nascent authority and the deepening concern of those in the parent LEA.

Lessons of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) disaggregation do seem to have been recognised, however, and when preparations for LGR in Wales were being made, requirements both for collaboration between incoming and outgoing authorities and inter-LEA collaboration were incumbent on those involved. This meant that plans were made for collaboration between authorities to provide services in most areas of Wales, and a range of models of support was established in the Welsh LEAs to overcome the prevailing anxieties about loss of expertise and economies of scale.

Different models of support have been employed by different authorities, ranging from a core-plus-brokerage model to support through highly structured groupings of schools based on secondary catchment areas.[2] The majority of LEAs employ a model in which schools receive a core of support and are able to receive further support through a Service Level Agreement, which usually involves schools purchasing a specified package of services for a set price. Of the eight rural LEAs, all but two collaborate with others to maintain an appropriate range of provision. In one exception, support is provided through a mixture of core provision, brokerage, and seconding expert teachers from within the authority as providers. In the other, reorganisation had not changed the schools it encompassed, so the need for collaboration with other education authorities was not an issue arising from reorganisation. Here, however, radical changes took place prior to reorganisation when, with the introduction of devolved funding to schools, a decision had been taken to cut back sharply on the advisory service and devolve most of the money to schools. Subsequently, new support staff were appointed and provision established that closely reflected the needs of the schools. Through the various strategies described above, local education authorities have been able to maintain support for their schools.

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[2]The catchment area is the geographical areas in which pupils who would normally attend the local secondary school (high school) live. A catchment group is the group of primary (elementary) schools that would normally "feed" the secondary school.

Approach

The present investigation is a qualitative study of 11 groups of rural schools whose staff collaborate for inservice education of teachers (INSET). These groups are located in five of the eight authorities that make up most of rural Wales—in the north, west, and middle section of the country. In these five counties, the LEAs support inter-school collaboration through the provision of structures within which the schools can work. The ways in which the LEAs support this collaboration vary, from those in which the structure is designed and directed by the authority to those in which schools operate freely within an authority-instigated framework.

The groups of schools were chosen on the basis of responses to two surveys carried out in 1996 and 1997, which focussed on the mode of leadership of the groups, and level and usefulness of collaboration. The level was measured on a four-point scale with respect to five aspects of collaboration: structure for collaboration, identification of INSET needs, preparation of materials and documents, activities, and funding. Eleven of the responding groups were selected for further qualitative study through semi-structured interviews conducted with teachers, headteachers, and LEA officers. The sample was designed to include groups of schools where little change in collaboration had occurred, as well as those where significant change had taken place since local government reorganisation. It was also designed to include a range of size and number of schools collaborating and a geographical spread.

Interview evidence was gathered between March and June 1997. Interviewees were sent a list of discussion points beforehand, and each interview took place in a school or education office with one researcher conducting the interview and another taking notes. Interviews lasted roughly 45 minutes, were conducted in English or Welsh, and were taped and then transcribed. Interviews were semi-structured: interviewees were first invited to respond freely to the discussion points and then were asked more specific questions.

The first category of discussion points related to identifying changes in the kinds of support and levels of provision, for both individual schools and collaborating groups of schools, that had occurred since the local government reorganisation. The second category focussed on the nature of the collaboration and how that had been affected by the reorganisation, how management and organisation of groups functioned, and factors relating to the underlying basis of the collaboration such as shared culture, common language, or geographical proximity. This category also focussed on (a) factors working against collaboration, such as competition for pupils, threats to autonomy, and relationships amongst teachers, and (b) factors promoting collaboration, such as mode of group leadership and appropriate LEA support frameworks. The third category focussed on (a) the type and amount of collaborative INSET that took place compared with school-based INSET, (b) teacher satisfaction with INSET provision, and (c) the perceived usefulness of collaborative INSET amongst teachers.

The frameworks that we discuss below came about from analysing interview notes and transcripts, and LEA and school documentation relating to support for collaboration in the professional development of teachers. From this, we established a picture of the types of practice taking place in each of the groups and the nature of the support framework provided by each of the authorities. We then examined the evidence to determine the types of working relationships that existed in each of these groups. We did this by identifying positive and negative statements made by teachers and headteachers regarding their perceptions of relationships within the groups, how the collaboration was managed, and the quality of provision and support received through the different frameworks. Examination of evidence from documents and interviews with LEA officers established priorities underlying each of the support frameworks, the perceptions of LEAs regarding the nature of the relationships they were building with schools, and how this helped them to develop their role as providers. From this analysis, common features emerged enabling three frameworks to be characterised, depending on what the LEA priorities were. In the first framework, the LEA provides a structure in which schools can freely operate. The autonomy of the schools is a priority whilst a structure for support is available into which schools may opt. Collaboration amongst schools may be facilitated but is not imposed; consequently, a range of practices takes place with schools using the LEA provision and support flexibly. Working relationships amongst schools varied, from a high level of trust and mutual support and collaboration to loose associations in a competitive atmosphere.

In the second framework, the relationships amongst schools, and between schools and the authorities, show strong elements of loyalty in spite of a degree of dissatisfaction with some of the provision. A training team had been established by the LEAs to act as the main provider, and a highly structured training framework was created. In theory, schools have an option to go elsewhere for their training provision, but their shared Welsh culture and language, together with their geographical location, makes it difficult for them to look elsewhere for their provision. The priority here appears to be service provision and strong links with the schools through the training framework.

In the third framework, a small training team has been formed and an open market is encouraged within which this team works. Here, rather than attempting to be the main source of provision, the emphasis is on establishing a system of monitoring and evaluating that promotes reflection

and development. A second priority has been to act as a leader and facilitator through supporting the piloting of inter-school collaborations, and facilitating dissemination of good practice and provision.

Findings and Discussion

Framework 1: Schools Freely Operating Within an Education Authority Framework

This model is employed throughout two of the new authorities in this study. Patterns of collaboration vary in the extent to which they are supported and encouraged and the use that is made of this collaboration by schools. Schools are organised in groups depending on the local secondary school catchment area; a cross-section of these will be discussed below.

In one group, the schools collaborate closely using the 5 closure days (statutory days when the schools are used by teachers for in-service training but are closed to pupils). Teachers work together in the local secondary school on areas of common interest such as information technology or art and technology. Evening courses, and longer courses, involving all schools in the catchment group are also planned to address specialist subject areas. The group is managed by a coordinator and team of headteachers who meet at least once a term and are supported by an education authority adviser whose responsibility is to advise and support this group of schools.

In addition to strong leadership and effective LEA support, the group has a longstanding history of working together, which has developed out of their common Welsh culture and language. As one headteacher in a small primary school said,

> It's always been very difficult. We find we're on a limb here, all the Welsh catchment area schools are here. . . . it's not just another language, it's another way of thinking . . .

A feeling of security is present, which is linked to the fact that the teachers know each other very well and that the schools are geographically spread in such a way as to minimise competition amongst schools for pupils. There is a strong feeling of commitment and a perception that what is provided meets their needs.

A very different situation exists elsewhere in the same county. Here the catchment group of primary schools meets only at the instigation of the secondary school to which their pupils will eventually go, and solely to address the issues of cross-phase transfer of pupils. There are no other meetings of this catchment group to address educational issues. No one person is allocated, or willing, to take on the role of coordinator, and their LEA adviser is not involved in supporting the catchment group for issues that relate only to the primary schools. There are, however, meetings of primary school headteachers organised by the education authority on the basis of a much larger geographical area, but these are only able to address general issues.

Within this catchment group, there is a general reluctance to share and exchange ideas, and there is a strong sense of competition for pupils. However, some ad hoc collaboration over schemes of work and policies does exist amongst those schools that are sufficiently distant to make competition not an issue. Again, a headteacher in a small primary school:

> We are not in competition at all and we feel we [collaborate]. I could never do that with my neighbouring schools . . . . It's a case of "we've got our own policies, we're not sharing with you."

In the particular school interviewed, there is a dependence on self-reliance and a rejection of many of the ideas offered by the LEA, in particular LEA frameworks for developing policy documents. Negative attitudes towards LEA support appear to stem from previous bad experiences of INSET provision by the authority, in which funds and time were perceived to have been wasted and advisers were not available when needed.

In the other county that uses catchment groups, one of the main functions of the group's coordinator is to manage the government-provided grant funding and monitor INSET activities. A group meeting is held annually in which decisions are made over what proportion of the budget will be used for joint activities and what the focus of joint activities will be. Since reorganisation, the proportion of joint INSET has fallen compared to individual school-based INSET.

Framework 2: Highly Structured and Centrally Organised Collaboration.

This model is employed throughout two of the new counties and depends to a large extent on LEA guidance and provision for INSET. This LEA provision is through an agency made up largely of the old county's advisory team. Each group of schools is based on the catchment area of the secondary school that they feed and is organised along the same lines, with a management team of headteachers and an overall coordinator. All schools are opted into the system through a service level agreement, whereby for a set price schools purchase a specified package of services. In this case, provision involves INSET through closure days involving central, catchment group and school-based events; individual teacher courses; LEA adviser visits; and after school meetings. Also included are courses for a small number of individual teachers nominated on a catchment

group basis, and courses for individual teachers selected from a menu and paid for from the delegated budget. All schools are entitled to a half-day visit from their adviser and may purchase other advice, from the team or outside, using their delegated budget.

Needs are identified initially as a school and then priorities are set on a catchment-group basis. Group coordinators then meet with county advisers to agree on a menu and programme of INSET provision for the year.

> Every school makes a survey of what courses his teachers would need, and the next year then we all meet together and pool all ideas and see what the main preference is. (Headteacher, small primary school)

Such a centrally controlled INSET framework has advantages in that it ensures a balance of INSET provision across the schools, is reviewed annually in response to those needs identified by the schools, and ensures consistency of provision across a geographically large area regardless of school location. All schools have opted into the service level agreements, which commits them to a higher level of LEA input than would otherwise be the case, thereby safeguarding the existence of a viable team of INSET providers.

Whilst this framework suggests a high level of collaboration, the level perceived by the schools varies considerably. More importantly, the level of perceived usefulness of the collaboration varies significantly from school to school, depending on how they have accessed the provision.

Some dissatisfaction was apparent and seemed to arise because some catchment groups perceived the framework to be immutable. These groups felt obliged to continue to use the two days allocated for centrally run courses, in spite of misgivings as to whether their needs were being met. Others negotiated reductions in these to provide flexibility to match the provision more closely to their needs.

The way that catchment groups used their closure INSET days can also lead to differing levels of satisfaction. In one instance, all catchment group INSET focussed on a specific topic to provide more in-depth training. Here, during two closure days an LEA team provided specialist input on a locally focussed topic for all teachers in the catchment group. This was then followed by a one-day INSET session in each of the eight primary schools in the catchment group. This sharply focussed in-depth approach led to a high level of satisfaction amongst those involved. In contrast, there was considerable dissatisfaction with closure day courses devoted to issue-raising and facilitation of group discussions, which were seen as not matching current needs and as being more appropriate to earlier stages of National Curriculum training.

> Sometimes some of the courses which have been arranged for the INSET days have not gone down very well. What teachers basically want are ideas . . . and what we are finding more and more lately is we're not getting these ideas. We're only getting teachers grouped together . . . discussing whatever the lecturer throws at them. (Headteacher, small primary school)

Whilst such schools are not completely happy with the nature of some of this provision, they are moving to change this from within. Schools are reluctant to work outside this framework and are probably continuing to work within it due to their long association with the old county, which is intrinsically Welsh in language and culture.

Within this framework, the change from a variety of clustering arrangements to organising on a catchment group basis was seen to have a number of advantages. These included easing the transition from primary to secondary school (elementary to high) through activities focussed on ensuring progression in pupils learning across the phases.

> There is close collaboration with the secondary school. We hope that we will be able to work in our own primary schools so that the children just follow on naturally when they go on to the secondary school. (Headteacher, small primary school)

Collaboration amongst staff members in examining approaches to assessment, using information technology, and reaching agreements as to what is expected of pupils at differing levels was seen as a positive aspect. Catchment grouping inevitably means that small and large schools belong to the same unit and, where the arrangement is not used flexibly enough to accommodate the differing priorities, problems may arise. In cases where INSET funding is pooled, larger schools can see themselves as subsidising the smaller ones.

The larger number of schools in a catchment group compared to earlier clustering arrangements can have a number of effects. Teachers sometimes feel that they are just receivers of INSET, playing a minor role in the decision making process. This was particularly true for teachers of early-years children (aged 3 to 8 years), where there was often a feeling that provision had not been sufficiently focussed on their specific needs. On the other hand, an advantage of these larger groupings is that teachers from different phases are there in sufficient numbers to form viable groups for support and the exchange of ideas. However, such large groupings can cause problems when it comes to dissemination from the 4- or 5-day courses offered to a small number of individual teachers who are nominated on a catchment-group basis. Whilst most teachers are happy

to report back in their schools, the prospect of dissemination to a larger group makes many teacher reluctant to go on these courses. As a result, dissemination has been limited to individual schools in many cases.

> We find a lot of teachers will not put their names down to go on courses because they have to report back . . . usually to a small cluster. (Headteacher, small primary school)

Solutions to this problem are being worked out. These include giving half a day's release for preparation for dissemination, together with the support of an experienced provider.

Framework 3: Collaboration within a Developmental Framework

This model has arisen in a new authority formed from parts of two adjoining old counties. This education authority is under a new leadership for professional development, consisting of a small team led by the Professional Development Officer. The authority now collaborates with three other education authorities in forming a curriculum support team to which each authority contributes expertise. In addition to this team, which provides INSET mainly through the medium of English, schools draw on a second team from a neighbouring consortium of authorities for much of its Welsh medium provision. Schools may also draw on other sources such as library services, teachers' centres, and the Welsh examination board (the Welsh Joint Education Committee).

Under this leadership, an interesting variety of forms of collaboration amongst schools is encouraged. Consider the comments of a Professional Development Officer:

> We're trying to encourage schools to work together. . . . Now we have a range [of clusters]. Each [cluster] has a coordinator, and we provide service training of one coordinator. . . . INSET [is provided] according to the cluster needs . . .

INSET coordinators have been identified for each cluster, and the authority provides training centrally for these clusters. Training includes a full-day meeting where coordinators discuss their INSET arrangements, needs, and evaluation with the Professional Development Officer. A central coordinator's budget pays for training and meetings and also provides for a half-day per month release for each coordinator to enable them to manage the INSET activities. Schools release a proportion of their funding, all of which is fully delegated to schools, to form this coordinator's budget.

These schools and groups of schools operate within a framework designed by the INSET team to provide for development. Central to this are two features: (a) a system of monitoring and evaluation in place, which encourages reflection and analysis of INSET practice; and (b) a model for collaborative INSET practice, which is being piloted in one cluster, that demonstrates how collaboration amongst schools might best work.

The evaluation process is underpinned by documentation aimed at guiding coordinators into a reflective analysis of their INSET experience and providing feedback on the quality and nature of this experience. Through this process, providers are being identified by teachers using criteria from the documentation which, amongst other things, focusses on how the provision relates to classroom practice and pupil learning outcomes. This information is then disseminated to all schools. Through this facility, schools and clusters are also encouraged to barter courses amongst themselves so as to match provision to needs. In addition, schools are encouraged to regard a wider range of activities, other than traditional courses, as being valid INSET (e.g., support sessions, workshops, exhibitions, conferences).

INSET activities are also monitored and reviewed with the aid of advisers who have special responsibility for a specific group of schools and who make visits to every school in that group at least once a term. In addition, a consultative group made up of headteachers, school or group coordinators, and subject leaders meet with these LEA advisers once or twice a term to discuss progress and review the overall procedure. These advisers may also serve to initiate and support inter-school collaboration.

The cluster of schools that is being used to pilot collaboration organises this mainly through the use of cross-school subject teams of which every teacher is a member. Fifty percent of INSET time is school-based and 50% is spent in cluster activities, much of the latter relating to work on policy and curriculum. In addition to an overall cluster INSET coordinator, these newly formed subject teams also have a coordinator funded from the centre to help motivate and support them. Each subject team sets targets in consultation with advisory staff, and progress towards these is monitored by the subject team coordinator. Where necessary, additional input is provided by the advisory staff.

With the formation of this new authority, there was a need to develop an approach to INSET that would accommodate a range of schools having experience of different INSET structures and differing levels of collaboration. This has been approached in three ways. First, INSET evaluation by the LEA provides for reflective analysis and discussion as described above. Less formal discussions also take place once or twice a term between the advisers and individual schools. The strength of this process is that everyone has the opportunity to provide feedback, thereby

consolidating ownership and ensuring a representative evaluation.

Second, the education authority has initiated and supported one cluster's collaboration, with the aim of developing, exploring, and modeling the most effective ways in which schools can work together. The establishment of cross-school subject teams has the advantage of involving all teachers, thus creating a culture of ownership and collaboration. It also has the advantage of not identifying any one subject area with an individual school, but instead all are identified with the cluster as a whole. This contrasts to the experiences of other counties where individual schools within a cluster divide the curriculum areas amongst them and then pool their policy documents and schemes of work. This approach has been known to cause dissatisfaction because the quality of the input can vary significantly from school to school. In this pilot cluster, however, subject teams are not left to make their own ways, but instead are working within a carefully thought-out framework that involves setting targets and monitoring their progress towards these targets. An important difference in this cluster is that one teacher is supported by central funding to act as an overall manager for all of the subject teams, thereby ensuring that progress is monitored and the review process is facilitated. It is worth noting that working together on curriculum areas is a relatively safe starting point for collaboration in that it involves common interests and is unlikely to be the subject of inter-school competition.

The third feature of the pilot cluster's approach is the effective dissemination of good practice and provision. This is done through encouraging wider networking in and across groups, the sharing and exchanging of INSET experiences, and circulation of the monthly bulletin and INSET directory. Central to this wider communication is the review process in which all teachers have the opportunity to contribute and in which they are able to comment on the relevance and usefulness of provision from a wide range of sources.

> In the report we ask [the schools] . . . to give an evaluation of what's really worked and why. . . . [A]lso we have the monthly bulletin. . . . [w]e invite them to tell us about the courses [and] then we circulate the information to all schools. . . . people can opt to go on other people's courses as well. So they're starting to barter courses. (Professional Development Officer)

In this way, new teams are promoted and new expertise developed. The very fact that the LEA is ready to facilitate this exchange of information in an open market is a healthy indication of the confidence they have in the quality of their own provision and in the INSET experiences the schools themselves are able to provide.

Synthesis

Within a wider context, the above frameworks correspond to some extent to those models of LEA governance characterised by Radnor et al. (1997) and Radnor and Ball (1996). The first two frameworks are similar to the models where LEAs prioritise civic association/community government (model 1) and civic association/service provision (model 2), respectively. Framework 1 has similarities to model 1 in that LEAs accept and promote the autonomy of the schools but recognise community needs through provision of a framework of support within which the schools can operate. If schools are unhappy with the provision, they may opt out completely. Framework 2 is similar to model 2 where "emphasis is upon service provision itself, with relationships with schools at the fore" and "aspects of an older, more paternalistic and personal form of leadership" remain important (Radnor et al., p. 208). Framework 3 has some elements of Radnor and Ball's third model, "enterprise association." Here, performance and monitoring and the open market for provision are high priorities, but this model also contains elements of model 1 in that educational priorities and leadership also are important.

Conclusions

In our previous study (Williams & Thorpe, 1997b), we asked schools to rate their level of collaboration through a scoring system. Reference back to these data shows that within the 11 groups of schools studied, there is a clear connection between the modes of leadership and the levels of collaboration. The level of collaboration is high in those groups led by a teacher specifically designated as group coordinator, and higher still if he or she is supported by a management team drawn from the schools involved.

Whilst there is a clear connection between the mode of leadership and level of collaboration, this does not necessarily mean that the level of usefulness of the collaboration is the same. Interview evidence suggests that a high level of collaboration does not guarantee that the usefulness of the INSET experience is rated highly, but rather that the success of this collaboration depends on a number of factors. These include the strength of leadership from within the group, the extent to which all teachers feel involved and represented in the decision making processes, the nature of LEA support, the level of commitment from teachers in the group, the extent to which needs are seen to be met, the presence of a common culture and language, and a feeling of security about the collaboration. This last factor may itself depend on whether school autonomy is under threat, the extent of competition for pupils, and the degree of confidence and trust teachers feel in one another across the group. Other studies, such as that of Lomax and Darley (1995) in their examination of inter-school links,

recognise this tension between competition and collaboration:

> Competition for pupils was seen as the main cause of the breakdown of good relationships between schools by heads. Inter-school links are changing in nature: the closer to you the other schools are, the less open the links . . . (p. 157)

The nature of the intervention made by the education authority is the key to success. If schools feel they are too constrained by what they see as a rigid structure in which their say is limited, they are less likely to be happy with the arrangement. Where the structure allows for the involvement of all teachers, and for feedback from all, then the collaboration is more likely to succeed. Commitment by the education authority through support and guidance from advisory staff being closely involved in the collaborative activities seems most effective.

There has been a move away from collaborative INSET towards school-based INSET, which now seems to have stabilised in such a way that curriculum areas that are not subject to national testing (e.g., history, geography) are being addressed collaboratively and those curriculum areas subject to national testing (e.g., language, math, and science) being addressed more on a school basis (also see Williams & Thorpe 1997c). This balance is understandable as schools focus more on individual school development plans and tend to want to take more responsibility for assessed subjects. Collaborative INSET that is not to do with primary/secondary transfer tends to focus more on local studies using more in-depth approaches, on teacher assessment of non-assessed subjects, and on ways to combine curriculum areas. The exception to this is in the cluster in which cross-school curriculum teams are operating and addressing all curriculum areas. Perhaps collaboration is safe and successful when it does not address issues that might be involved in inter-school competition or when collaboration is in effect collegiate and involves all equally.

Inter-school collaboration is still an important way of providing INSET for small schools. There has been a shift towards more school-based INSET and a clear division between what is done in schools and what is done collaboratively seems to be emerging. This seems to be driven by forces such as assessment and inspection that have the effect of making schools become more inward looking, particularly when within a competitive atmosphere. There is a danger that opportunities for exchanging ideas could become limited to less contentious areas, such as curricular issues, as opposed to those relating to wider school management where exchange of ideas might be viewed as blunting a school's competitive edge.

Small schools in particular stand to benefit from a wide forum in which to exchange and develop ideas on as many aspects as possible. As Goddard and Clinton (1994) point out:

> A learning network between institutions opens up the creative and learning opportunities for individuals and ultimately benefits the institution. For small schools linkages across schools are essential if any viable learning environment is to be created. The viability of networks depends on being able to bring together enough people to create the motivation, capacity and creative energy to be productive. (p. 59)

A middle path between mechanistic management and free market competition would appear to provide the best conditions for collaboration to flourish. To succeed, it also must be managed in such a way as to involve every group member by giving each a clearly defined role and responsibility, and by providing education authority support and leadership from a member of the advisory staff with specific responsibility to develop the group's collaborative practice.

In broader terms, it would seem that there are parallels between Wales and similar situations developing in parts of the United States. In many states, the role of the school board continues to change and new initiatives in school governance, such as school-based management and charter schools, continue to gain support (Dondero, 1996; Madsen, 1996; Oswald, 1995). Crowson, Boyd, and Mawhinney (1995) maintain that reform linked to national and state goals failed to capture broad support and that "thinking may be increasingly leaning towards radical solutions such as privatization or breaking up the system" (p. 1). Dondero (1996) points to a move from top-down management to more school-based decision. Johnes (1995), however, agrees that whilst there is no evidence that changing the locus of control affects pedagogical outcomes, there appears to be an optimum locus in terms of minimum cost which lies between full state control and absence of state authority.

It seems likely therefore that, on the basis of cost alone, there will be a continued need for a body exercising some degree of control in such an intermediate position, whether it be in the form of a district board or some other community-based body. Todras (1993) cites various recommendations for change in the role of school boards, including transforming them into education policy boards responsible for establishing and overseeing, but not implementing, policy; separating governance from delivery of services; contracting out school management; establishing modified school-based management plans involving elected local school committees; and giving them greater flexibility as buyers of education. Here the role of district curriculum consultants, staff developers, and other local facilitators will

be affected and new models of support are likely to evolve. Clearly there are similarities here with the situation in Wales, where reforms have brought about the same sort of changes in local governance followed by corresponding changes in support frameworks. As such changes come about in the United States, districts, or their equivalent bodies, could look towards supporting innovations such as inter-school collaboration in order to overcome school isolation as a result of increasing site-based management. The type of school-district relationship that would best support innovations of this sort are likely to be similar to those described in Framework 3 and some aspects of Framework 1 above. These have features comparable to those districts characterised by Louis (1989, cited in Fullan, 1993) in her study of school-district relationships in which two dimensions, level of bureaucracy and level of engagement, were identified as critical. The only clearly positive district contexts were those identified as having "high engagement and low bureaucracy," where "the picture is one of co-management, with coordination and joint planning enhanced through the development of consensus between staff members at all levels" (p. 161).

As with LEAs in Wales, school districts are likely to reappraise their roles as the locus of control shifts towards schools. Poston (1994) probably best sums this up when he says "school boards must face the challenges and demands, adapt to new initiatives and requirements from clientele, and modify the organizational functions and programs to fulfill their responsibilities" (p. 3).

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