Collaborative Networks : Clustering Local Schools to meet Special Educational Needs

The promise of local Educational Boards in the recent White Paper presents the prospect of special educational needs being met on a more regional basis. Ordinary and special schools will need to seek ways to share resources, expertise and information. Collaborative school networks in the UK have been particularly successful in countering the competitive culture that has, in places, threatened the survival of special educational services.

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COLLABORATING IN A CLIMATE OF COMPETITION

Since the introduction of Local Management of Schools (LMS) in the United Kingdom and subsequent economic and other pressures to 'opt out' of the State maintained system, there has emerged a competitive element foreign to most educators. Raising the image of a school has begun to be deemed more important than curriculum delivery. In particular, pupils with special educational needs have been put at risk although the Code of Practice (DfE 1994) has set out to afford some protection for this group. However, schools remain overly conscious of their need to achieve demonstrable academic success and ensure their continued survival. Competing with other establishments appears to many as the only possible route available and sophisticated marketing strategies have been adopted in pursuance of this.

Running counter to this trend is a movement, sometimes 'underground', towards the development of collaborative networks. These have even been described as

'subversive' (Wallace and Hall, 1994). As special educational needs provision is seen most at risk, it is not surprising that this area has frequently been the vanguard of such developments.

MOVES TOWARDS CENTRALISM AND ATTENDANT DANGERS

Through legislation and other means, the UK Government seeks to achieve a number of objectives:

- persuade schools to seek grant maintained status
- get rid surplus places in the system
- force competition on schools by publishing academic and other results
- by-pass local authority control and influence
- centrally control school funding

The net effect of the above measures is to strip local authorities of their powers leaving them with only minimal responsibilities.

FEARING THE EFFECTS OF A POLITICAL 'QUANGOCRACY'

There is a growing legitimate concern that in place of local authority influence there will emerge a centrally appointed 'quangocracy' with specific political objectives. The Code of Practice (DfE 1994) goes some way towards preserving local authority input and control over special educational needs but fears abound that even this may be diminished by future legislation. Local authorities are currently being encouraged to :

- adopt a client/contractor relationship with schools
- publish and monitor special educational needs
- ensure that there are in place systems of identification and monitoring of special needs
- delegate funds for non-statemented pupils

(see Audit Commission Reports, 1992a and 1992b).

The likely effects of the above measures are to encourage schools to opt out, make them reluctant to admit special needs pupils who will distort their results and, conversely, compete for talented pupils in their neighbourhood. The question that now occupies the educator's mind is:

> **Should we compete with other schools to ensure our own survival or should we attempt to form alliances with others and corporately protect pupils' needs on a wider basis?**

LOCAL CLUSTERING FOR SPECIAL NEEDS DELIVERY

There is evidence that after initial sorties into the market place, schools are examining other possibilities. The Fish Committee (ILEA, 1985) was the first to acknowledge that special needs delivery might be best achieved through 'clusters' of schools. Briefly they argued that the main purposes would be:

- the sharing of responsibility and identifying and meeting special educational needs
- facilitating links between the phases of education
- assisting decision making especially in the under-five and post-school areas
- working more effectively with other agencies.

RATIONALE FOR SCHOOL CLUSTER ARRANGEMENTS

Between 1985 and 1991 fourteen local authorities received approval from the Secretary of State for Education for over £7m to be spent on finding ways of enriching the curriculum in small rural primary schools. A team led by Professor Maurice Galton of the University of Leicester, produced the Rural Schools Curriculum Enhancement National Evaluation (SCENE) Project Final Report (DES 1991). This came down heavily in favour of schools clustering to meet a wide variety of needs. Subsequently the Department for Education (DfE), as part of its policy for promoting grant maintained status, issued a further document encouraging rural schools to enter into cluster arrangements (Going Grant Maintained with Other Schools: GM Clusters, DfE 1994).

Further evidence of government interest emerges in Circular 6/94 (The Organisation of Special Educational Provision, DfE 1994) which accompanies the Code of Practice (1994). Here there are clear recommendations to school governing bodies to consult with others, the local authority and the emerging Funding Agency for Schools (FAS) body over such matters as school special needs policies, the maximising of expertise and resources, the development of specialisms and in-service training.

In summary, a range of developments is pushing schools into a consideration of collaborative ventures. There are three principle reasons why they should move towards such agreements :

- economies of scale in obtaining and deploying resources
- maximising expertise and resources in convenient geographical areas
- exchanging information and interacting dynamically with others to develop skills and expand provision.

NETWORKS, CLUSTERS AND FEDERATIONS

There are many terms used to describe collaborative arrangements : networks, families, councils, federations, consortia, pyramids and clusters. In an attempt to rationalise these, Lunt et al (1994) have described them under three broad headings :

Networks are seen as loose, informal and widespread linkages between schools or groups of teachers. They exist largely for the exchange of ideas and mutual support. By nature they are temporary, the participants working on specific tasks then disbanding or moving on to some other task.

Clusters are groupings that are more formal and permanent. Lunt et al (1994) describe a cluster as:

... a relatively stable and long term commitment among a group of schools to share some resources and decision making about an area of school activity. There is a degree of formality in that there are regular meetings of cluster schools to plan and monitor the activity concerned. There is some commitment of resources (e.g. teacher time) and some loss of autonomy implied, since schools will have to negotiate some decisions about this area of activity.

Clusters can be single phase (i.e. all primary or all secondary) or multi-phase including special schools .... their origins can be 'top down' (i.e. local authority initiated) or 'bottom up' (initiated by the schools themselves). (Lunt et al, 1994, p.74).

Federations are considered by Lunt et al to be permanent and extensive and may arise from schools merging under one headteacher and governing body. This is now an increasingly likely possibility with small schools pooling their resources in rural areas.
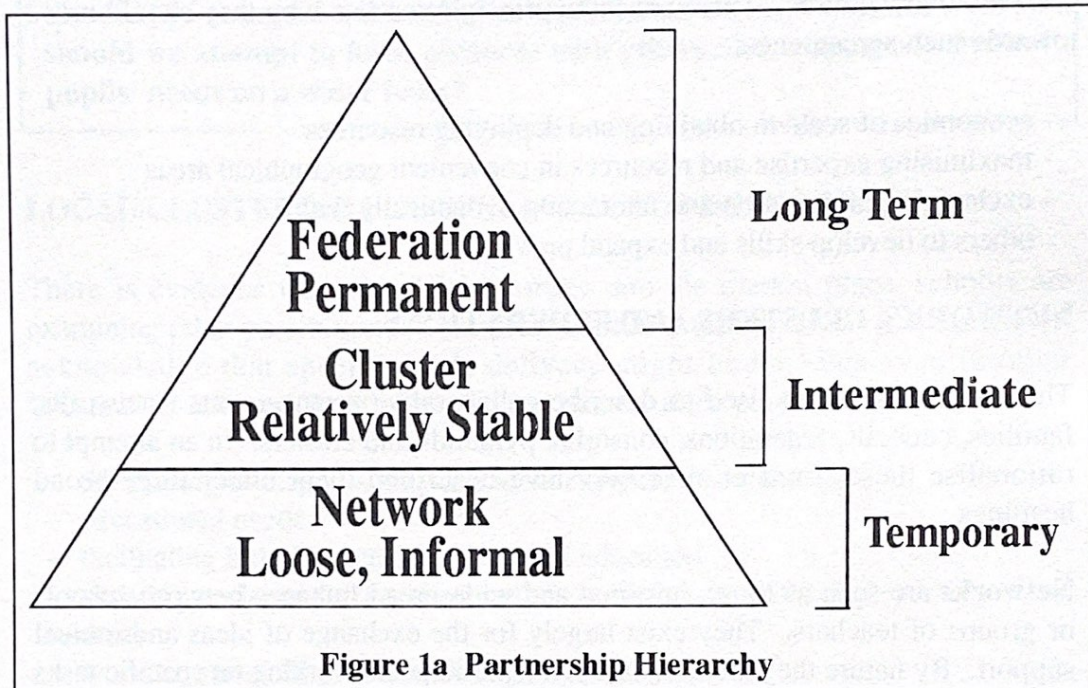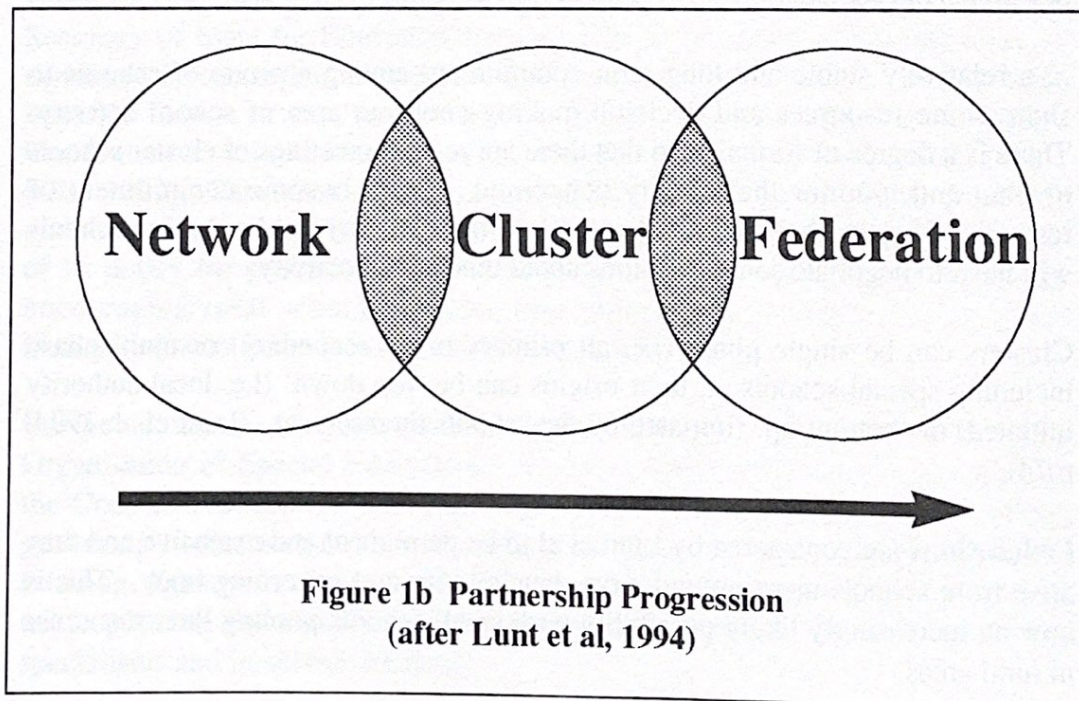
PARTNERSHIPS AND PROGRESSIONS

Figure 1a Partnership Hierarchy

Figure 1a illustrates this partnership hierarchy; Figure 1b the progression some arrangements have begun to make.

Figure 1b Partnership Progression
(after Lunt et al, 1994)

LOCAL ANSWERS TO LEGISLATIVE DEMANDS

Dyson and Gains (1993) have produced a theoretical model to show how developments might take place in the course of time. The model posits autonomous schools working within an enabling structure, currently the local authority. It envisages school collaborating in clusters, making joint use of support services etc. and further conceives clusters joining in larger groups as 'consortia' (Figure 2). Gains and Smith (1994), on the other hand, focus on micro models of special needs delivery identifying seven possibilities. (Figure 3, Page 117).
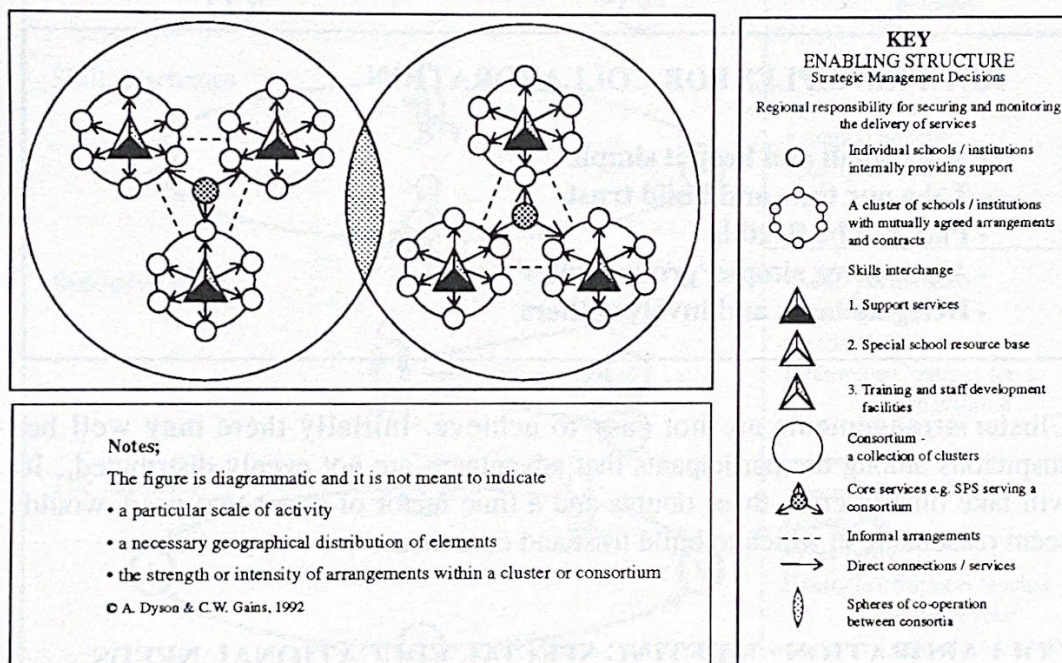
KEY
ENABLING STRUCTURE
Strategic Management Decisions

Regional responsibility for securing and monitoring the delivery of services

○ Individual schools / institutions internally providing support

A cluster of schools / institutions with mutually agreed arrangements and contracts

Skills interchange

1. Support services

2. Special school resource base

3. Training and staff development facilities

Consortium - a collection of clusters

Core services e.g. SPS serving a consortium

- - - - Informal arrangements

——→ Direct connections / services

Spheres of co-operation between consortia

Notes;

The figure is diagrammatic and it is not meant to indicate

• a particular scale of activity

• a necessary geographical distribution of elements

• the strength or intensity of arrangements within a cluster or consortium

© A. Dyson & C.W. Gains, 1992

Figure 2

ORGANISATION OF COLLABORATIVE NETWORKS

Lunt et al (1994) offer advice on how clusters might develop and pose a number of questions potential participants should determine before proceeding (pp82-84). Similarly Wallace and Hall (1994) offer a 'collaboration kit' made up of 11 guidelines (see end of article). From the above we can begin to identify some key questions and key principles for action.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR COLLABORATION

- Who are our natural partners ?
- What do we want from this arrangement?
- What are we prepared to offer?
- Who should we consult?
- What is our 'vision'?
- Where should we begin?
- How will we measure our success?

KEY PRINCIPLES FOR COLLABORATION

- Start small and keep it simple
- Take our time and build trust
- Plan but be flexible
- Agree some simple 'ground rules'
- Delegate tasks and involve others

Cluster arrangements are not easy to achieve. Initially there may well be suspicions among the participants that advantages are not evenly distributed. It will take time to erase these doubts and a time factor of about two years would seem reasonable in which to build trust and consensus.

COLLABORATION : MEETING SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

There is a growing body of opinion and research that supports the concept of schools forming partnerships to meet the increasing demands of special educational needs. Broadly speaking the advantages are :

- the sharing of information
- facilitating links between phases of schooling
- liaising with agencies and other groups
- developing joint policies
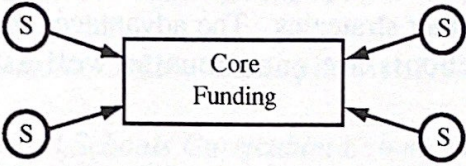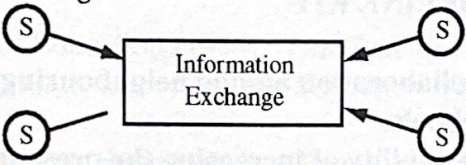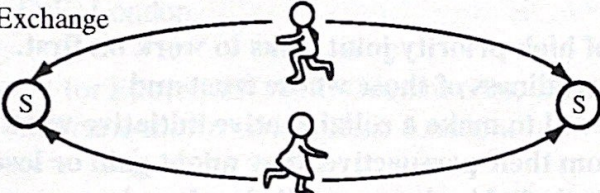- maximising expertise and resources
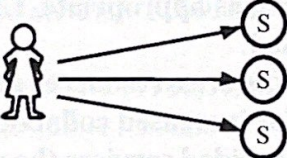- economies of scale in purchases

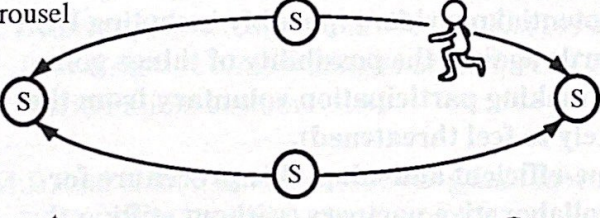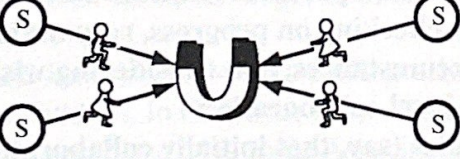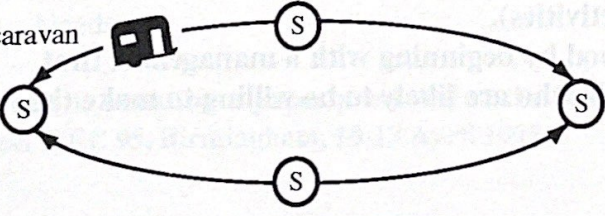| MODEL	KEY FEATURES
Pooling S → [Core Funding] ← S S → ← S	• specific purpose • allocation of finances • renewable Examples: Bulk Purchase Staff training
Information Exchange S → [Information Exchange] ← S S → ← S	• general • sharing - open ended • working groups Examples: Assessment, monitoring Curriculum delivery
Skills Exchange S ⇄ S	• medium, long term • teacher swop • mutual benefit Example: SpLD for mathematics
Specialist input → S → S → S	• semi-permanent • contracts • traditional Examples: Contract for behavioural support
The carousel S S S S S	• permanent • contracts • rota basis Examples: Support teacher serving four schools
The Magnet S S S S	• permanent • pupils move • specialised bases Example: IT base
The caravan S S S S	• permanent • peripatetic • expensive resources Example: Mobile IT

Figure 3: Some micro-collaborative models

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There are a range of existing models that enable us to understand how clusters can be initiated, developed and sustained. A market-led strategy is not helpful in delivering better services for pupils with special educational needs and so it is in everyone's interest to examine other strategies. The advantages of collaborating with other colleagues and schools are enormous as well as being more professional and satisfying.

A COLLABORATION GUIDELINE KIT

- Assess the current level of collaboration among neighbouring (mainstream and special) schools.
- Consider the purpose and feasibility of increasing the present level of collaboration.
- Identify a small range of high priority joint tasks to work on first.
- Establish the degree of readiness of those whose trust and commitment will be needed to make a collaborative initiative work and determine what, from their perspective, they might gain or lose.
- Consult initially with key individuals (especially headteachers, chairs of governing bodies and, as appropriate, LEA staff) whose support is needed to get started.
- Consider any structures, procedures, resources and external support that will be needed for increased collaboration.
- Determine what externally provided services the group may wish to purchase and consult potential providers (possibly including LEA staff). Consider safeguards against the possibility of things going wrong (for example, by making participation voluntary from the outset, people are unlikely to feel threatened).
- Work out a flexible, time-efficient and adaptable procedure for keeping in touch with collaborative partners (without stifling the initiative with bureaucracy), checking on progress, responding to unpredictable changes in circumstances, and considering wishes to make changes in the agreed level collaboration.
- Establish realistic ground rules (say, that initially collaboration may be confined to certain activities).
- Go where the going is good by beginning with a manageable first initiative involving people who are likely to be willing to make the necessary commitment.

Wallace and Hall, 1994

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