The school-as-learning-community within New Public Management: the role of organisational structure.

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Abstract:

Under New Public Management, schools have struggled with balancing the requirement to maximise ‘performance’ with the desire to optimise the quality of learning opportunities. The academic conception of the school-as-learning-community (for example Mitchell and Sackney 2000) appears to offer a better vision for schools, encouraging a move away from short-term tactical responses, towards more strategic behaviour, however some schools appear to be better able than others to develop as learning communities. This ability appears to be partly associated with structural practices, that is, the way that teachers operationalize their organisational structure.

To investigate how structural practices might contribute to the development of the learning community, an in-depth, quasi-ethnographic study of three high-performing English secondary schools was undertaken. The schools had, in varying degrees, the identifying features suggested in the schools-as-learning-communities literature, but were subject to different governances. Data collection involved participant observation, shadowing key teachers, informal discussions with various members of staff and parents, and semi-structured interviews with teachers.

An analytical framework established by comparing features associated with New Public Management, as practiced in England, with those of the schools-as-learning-communities literature, enabled a rich understanding to be formed of the complexities that face educational leaders with regard to organisational structure. This paper presents some of the key findings of the study and also explores the notion of social capital to explain how some practices support the development of learning communities.
Introduction

During the last two decades ‘New Public Management’ (NPM) (Pollitt 1993) has become a dominant ideology, with accompanying discourse, among many governments across the globe (Whitty, Power et al. 1998). It derived initially from New Managerialism, whereby managers are given greater powers to respond to local conditions than they would have under bureaucracy (Enteman 1993). It was later developed within the political economic field of New Institutional Economics, influencing political thought with regard to the running of public sector services (Clarke, Cochrane et al. 1994).

The ubiquity of the New Managerialism discourse across many contexts and countries, has arguably reframed our perceptions of society, guiding what is perceived to be problematic in society, shaping political solutions (through NPM), and acting to restrict thinking about other (Clarke and Newman 1997). For example, by focussing on a particular set of issues such as economic viability, it may be accused of marginalizing others, such as the altruistic notion of the public good. In addition, dissent to a particular reform is either funnelled into arguments about the dominant, discourse-defined issues, reinforcing their apparent importance, or simply dismissed as resistance to change.

An alternative way of conceiving schools is as ‘learning communities’:

In a learning community each person is a worthwhile participant in the tasks, activities and responsibilities of the community. Each individual works with others in a spirit of experimentation and risk taking to improve the educational experience of all individuals in the school [...] each person deserves the support and care of other school members. People work together in a spirit of trust and mutual respect.

(Mitchell and Sackney 2000:8)

Achieving this ideal may, however, be problematic. In schools where NPM is dominant, it may be difficult for those who wish to inspire change, to think outside the NPM discourse. It is also unclear how the rate and extent of externally imposed reform might come to be reduced to release time for teachers to engage critically with policy. Fielding (2001) warns that schools that pursue the learning organisation objective might operate more effectively under the prevailing conditions yet may fail to challenge various underlying conceptions of education that create problems. The learning organisation school is one which actively learns from its ‘customers’ (parents, but also possibly pupils and government agencies), adapting in the light of this learning, but, according to Fielding (2001), in the current political climate, the function of members is still to service such schools’ need to survive by producing high examination results. In this research I distinguish schools-as-learning-communities (Retallick, Cocklin et al. 1999; Sergiovanni 1999; Fielding 2001; Jeffrey and Woods 2003) as
different from Fielding’s notion of learning organisation, in that these attempt to challenge aspects of NPM.

While discourse presents one problem, another appears to be the nature of organisational structures and the demands these make on teachers. Bottery and Wright claim that:

Changing the structures and functioning of the educational institutions [may be as important as] consciousness raising in the teaching profession or pressing for more professional-friendly legislation

(Bottery and Wright 2000:82-83)

If aspects of organisational structures are the key, as suggested, it raises the question about how they might help or hinder the ideal of the learning community.

The research and conceptual framework

The overarching aim of the research was to consider how organisational structures in high-performing schools support the development of the school as a learning community. The relationship between these is mediated by structural practices, as shown in figure 1

![Diagram showing the interplay between organisational structure and culture.](image)

**Figure 1:** Diagram showing the interplay between organisational structure and culture.

A structural practice, such as colleagues informally reflecting on a previous lesson they have given, is made possible by the presence of both the particular organizational structure (such as sharing an office with subject colleagues) and the appropriate supporting trait(s) of culture (such as mutual trust and a sense of collaboration with the colleagues in the office).
Working within a naturalistic paradigm (Guba 1981), I used this conceptual framework to study three examples of high-performing (that is, 75% pupils achieved 5 or more A-C grades at GCSE) schools which espoused many of the traits of the schools-as-learning-communities, as defined in the literature. Three schools – ‘community’ comprehensive, ‘foundation’ grammar and independent – were selected, representing a range of relationships with government policy. The independent school, in particular, offered an opportunity to observe the extent of constraint within the state sector schools. Using an ethnographic case-study approach, it was possible to explore in-depth each school’s structural practices, assess the degree to which the school’s reflected schools-as-learning-communities, or NPM agendas, and note the organisational structures. Data were developed through participant observation, shadowing, and semi-structured interviews with teachers. An analytical framework based on the ten common themes between NPM and schools-as-learning-communities was used to gain insight into the relationship between aspects of organisational structures and traits of the culture, and it is to this I turn next.

New Public Management

Central tenets of NPM were identified by Hood (1991)) as including:

- Increased discretionary control by professional managers,
- Explicit standards and measures of performance,
- An emphasis on controlling the output
- Competition among service providers
- Increased use of private sector management practices
- Parsimony
- Disaggregation of services into competing groups

Fergusson (2000) also adds the notion of ‘responsibilization’, of either the service providers (who ‘fail’ if they do not respond suitably to customers) or citizens (who are refused services if they do not conform to what is required of them).

In England, Sinclair et al. (1995) noted that the overall thrust of the early initiatives was the pragmatic one of reducing expense without reducing the quality of the service. More recent changes, however, could be framed as ensuring that citizens, and British firms, are equipped for the flexibility needed for economic survival in a rapidly changing, post-modern society. Thus, currently under NPM, public service providers need to demonstrate their achievement of mandated goals in exchange for a degree of autonomy. The accepted mode of participation for citizens, on the other hand, is to be engaged in (waged) work, and education is viewed by policy makers as a key lever in this form of participation.
The form that NPM takes in each country can vary considerably: in England, for example, the curriculum was centralized under NPM, whereas in New Zealand it was decentralized. In the English context, several reforms or official interpretations (issued from the government department responsible for schools) have occurred in each year since the mid eighties. Such reforms include:

- a compulsory National Curriculum, specifying subjects and content
- additional national testing of 7, 11, and 13 year olds
- the publication (in newspapers and on the web) of performance tables of both these tests and the GCSE (16 years olds), and A level (18 year olds)
- foregrounding parental choice of school (which was already available under the 1944 Education Act but most parents sent pupils to their local school until the early nineties). Schools must now specify their entrance criteria, and this must also be in line with ‘local authority’ (that is county or city borough) policy
- a regime of intensive inspection (‘Ofsted’), with published reports
- Ofsted inspection teams with ‘lay’ members working alongside professionals
- privatization of services such as inspection, catering, cleaning, and running of schools (See Ball 2007)
- appraisal/performance management of teachers
- voluntary school governors drawn from parents, staff, and locals, who are accountable to Ofsted and notionally to parents
- a compulsory headteacher qualification (NPQH)
- National Strategies, that specify, for example, the (multi-part) format of a lesson, and the methods of teaching reading and mathematics, and encourage particular types of ‘questioning’ strategies in lessons
- performance-related pay of teachers
- funds which individual schools can bid for, associated with, for example, ‘specialist status’ (where they must give evidence of their specialism and how they can use this to help other schools in the area) or teacher-research.
- ‘Work Force Reform’ which includes, for example, specifying what duties teachers may or may not be given, and what duties may attract enhanced pay
- school self-evaluation, based on a prescribed set of criteria, to be checked for accuracy by Ofsted

By increasing control of curriculum and teaching method, it has become easier to monitor the ‘output’, that is, the examination results and (through inspection, and performance management) conformity to required procedure. Schools are encouraged to compete against each other for funding
and for pupils; teachers are encouraged to compete against each other for internal resources and performance-related pay, apparently giving leverage to headteachers to ensure suitable teaching occurs. Inspection reports and performance tables notionally give enough information for parents to make choices between schools, although in practice choice is limited by the number of pupils that a popular school can take. Various privatisation initiatives apparently reduce costs or bring in additional private funds.

As these have been translated into practice within the English education system, empirically based researchers such as Jeffreys and Woods (1998), MacBeath and Galton (2004), Reay (1998) and Gleesom and Gunter (2001) have highlighted other characteristics associated with NPM in England, such as: risk minimisation; impoverished relationships; teaching being brought under the control of those not within the classroom; and about transmitting a mandated content to pupils (as a result of centralising curriculum content and testing). For example, performance tables of GCSE grades ranked schools according to the number of students who gained five or more A-C grades, resulting in many schools tactically targeting borderline ‘C’ grade students for extra tuition (referred to by Gillborn and Youdell (2000) as ‘educational triage’). Yet other academics undertaking meta-analysis or engaging in philosophical debate, such as Thrupp and Willnott (2003), Bottery and Wright (2000), Ozga (2000) and O’Neill (2002) have been concerned with how mistrust of teachers has led to trust being placed in systems, relationships being described in terms of performance, with pressure exerted on teachers to conform. (this is further summarised in figure 2)

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Individual responsibility*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Risk-minimisation (e.g. ‘educational triage’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Transmissive teaching (e.g. closely defined syllabi and teaching strategies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>A focus on measurable outcomes *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Detached relationships, related to performance (e.g. commodification of pupils)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Competitive working relationships seen as key to create improvement *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Trust based primarily on systems of monitoring and motivation (theory X (McGregor 1960)) (Also see: Elliot 2001; O’Neill 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Customer-supplier relationships with the environment (e.g. parents) *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Strong ‘heroic’ leadership (e.g. ‘superhead’)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Hood (1991)

**Figure 2:** Ten features of NPM in English schools that contrast with schools-as-learning-communities.
Schools-as-learning communities

The schools-as-learning-communities literature such as Jeffrey & Woods, (2003) Mitchell and Sackney (2000); Woods (1999), Retallick (1999), Clark (1996) among others, portray a complex notion. In essence, learning communities, and the professional learning communities that operate within them, are premised on an intrinsic excitement for work which engages and motivates members of staff and sustains the educational focus. Organisational structure serves the achievement of this vision in a particular way. The role of teachers is conceived differently to that within the New Public Management discourse; professionalism is in some respects more rigorous and demanding. Relationships are viewed as partnerships. Systems are called for that allow members to work together, engage with the problematic issues, and monitor the results of their own efforts, so that learning community utilises the potential of its collective brainpower. Structural support is also needed for the dissemination of knowledge about practice, and this affects decisions about, for example, timetabling, conduct of meetings, and the environment in which such discussions take place – not forgetting that dissemination may also be informally achieved through: communities-of-practice that are nurtured and cherished; ‘open door’ policies to classrooms; and informal discussions among colleagues out of classroom contexts, such as at lunch-time.

The summary traits given in figure 3 are integrally connected to each other and therefore shape what is meant by each item. I am aware and concerned that there is the potential to cause damage to the overall notion by providing such a list where items can be read out of context, however for the purposes of the analysis it proved useful to do this. The traits were derived from a review of the descriptions of such schools within the schools-as-learning-community literature,

1. Shared responsibility among all members
2. Considered risk-taking and experimenting to improve teaching and learning
3. Social constructivist thinking & reflective practice, prevalent and dominant
4. A focus on activities which improve every member’s educational experience
5. Mutual care & respect
6. Working relationships that tend to be collaborative, but embrace diversity, and seen as key to improvement
7. Mutual trust (theory Y(McGregor 1960))
8. Partnerships with the environment (for example, parents)
9. Diverse interests and talents embraced
10. Distributed leadership

Figure 3: Ten features of schools-as-learning-communities that contrast with NPM in English schools
Comparing the two lists common themes can be perceived, interpreted differently in each discourse: Responsibility and responding; Attitudes to risk; Sources of change; Teacher development; Style of relationships; Assumptions about motivating improvement; Assumptions about trust; Relationships the environment; Conformity, diversity and systems; and Leadership opportunities.

**Findings**

All three schools (St A, BCS, and CGS) displayed various aspects of learning communities, but possessed different strengths (see figure 4). These strengths were associated with the manner in which teachers within the schools interacted among each other and connected with others beyond the community (see figure 5). These underpin the following discussions. The social nature of many connections at St A (the independent school) appears to be associated with the underlying concern for moral well-being that stemmed from the Ethos (particular explicit ethos that was named, referred to and described in the school). The school’s world-wide relationships also commonly served to support this philosophy. Connections at BCS (the comprehensive) were more immediately purposeful, and related to shared work areas and the pedagogical meeting structures created by the Headteacher. This was underpinned by county-wide connections to educational institutions. At CGS (the Grammar), interactions tended to concern the academic and pastoral well-being of pupils. They were associated with the work spaces and meetings that had been negotiated by long-established teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus of teaching community’s densest interactions</th>
<th>St A</th>
<th>BCS</th>
<th>CGS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers social</td>
<td>##</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil welfare</td>
<td></td>
<td>##</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil pedagogy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>##</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographical spread of connections</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local town</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>##</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County</td>
<td></td>
<td>##</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>##</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus of learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>##</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td></td>
<td>##</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>##</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## signifies comparative strength

**Figure 4:** Diagram contrasting strengths of each school.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type and source of connection</th>
<th>St A</th>
<th>BCS</th>
<th>CGS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regularly-made, through shared space</td>
<td>Mark room</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Team offices</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>###</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching area</td>
<td>##</td>
<td>##</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staffroom</td>
<td>##</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regularly-made, through meetings, with:</td>
<td>Department</td>
<td>##</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pastoral teams</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Team leaders</td>
<td>##</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cross-team small groups</td>
<td>###</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All Staff</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional, supported by school structures, to connect to:</td>
<td>Other schools: ‘bid’</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other schools: other causes</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents: social</td>
<td>##</td>
<td>##</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeder schools</td>
<td>##</td>
<td>#</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other Institutions</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>###</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LEA advisory</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional, initiated by individuals, to:</td>
<td>Past/present members</td>
<td>##</td>
<td>##</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professionals</td>
<td>#</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institutions</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff (social)</td>
<td>###</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of # signifies comparative importance

‘*’ signifies unavailable

LEA: local education authority (the county-level authority to which state schools belonged, and from whom schools can buy advisory services)

Bid: a bid for government money for ‘specialist status’, which involves demonstrating how the school will help other schools develop in the specialist area

**Figure 5:** Diagram summarising the sources, types and comparative importance of different connections in each school
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National initiatives and external imposition</th>
<th>St A</th>
<th>BCS</th>
<th>CGS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Work force reform’</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist status</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>###</td>
<td>##</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring of teachers</td>
<td>###</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>###</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>multi – part lesson</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>###</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘questioning’</td>
<td>#</td>
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<td>#</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflective practice</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structural innovation</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>###</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical</td>
<td>###</td>
<td>##</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject innovation</td>
<td>###</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-department/ whole school innovation</td>
<td>###</td>
<td>###</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recent Courses supported</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pastoral</td>
<td>###</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>###</td>
<td>##</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>###</td>
<td>##</td>
<td>#</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technological</td>
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<td>##</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examination</td>
<td>###</td>
<td>###</td>
<td>###</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National strategies</td>
<td>###</td>
<td>###</td>
<td>#</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career/management enhancement</td>
<td>###</td>
<td>##</td>
<td>#</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Number of # signifies comparative importance
‘-‘ signifies this is not applicable

**Figure 6:** Diagram indicating the comparative strengths of the foci of change in each school
Learning opportunities
A variety of learning opportunities were available to teachers, some as a response to externally mandated change, others the result of reflective practice within the school. The former was typically supported by attendance on courses and whole-school in-service training, and reinforced through monitoring, whereas the latter was often supported through informal as well as formal means. The importance, even in these schools, of handling externally imposed change is to some degree reflected in the greater attendance at examination board, national strategy and technological courses, this last being strongly encouraged by government incentive at the time of the research. Nonetheless, teachers were also supported to attend other types of courses in all three schools (see figure 6)

Clarity of role
One issue that emerged from the data was the manner in which clarity of role and responsibilities was managed in these schools. Teachers had a clear understanding of what they believed was their role and that of others, yet these were not about adhering to what was written down, nor were they necessarily the same among all teachers holding a similar job in any one school; one teacher might see his role as including attending courses to inform practice, while another might see it as staying exclusively in the classroom. Instead, understanding and clarifying the role came through the many interactions that teachers had with one another, in combination with individuals behaving consistently.

The precise nature of the role, the sort of clarification that reduces conflict, would need to be more detailed than could be described in any handbook or job description. Instead, the clarity came through tacit explorations with other teachers. For example, at St A the teachers and heads of department all knew that the Deputy Head was the person who would clarify a system problem. New heads of departments already understood this too, suggesting that they had already developed this knowledge in some tacit unwritten manner in a short space of time. This would seem to point to the importance of the many weak interactions that teachers had with one another. These interactions allowed teachers to tell stories that reinforced the position and role of the Deputy Head, such as the teacher who told me she had the ‘utmost respect’ for him and giving an example to illustrate why she felt this way. In addition the direct interactions that teachers had with the Deputy Head meant that there were many opportunities for reciprocity to occur, and mutual trust over a range of issues to develop.

Formal authority and distributed leadership.
Although in different ways many teachers felt that they had opportunities to lead their colleagues, there was still an acknowledgement of positional authority, particularly of the Headteacher. In all three schools, but especially noticeable in St A and BCS, teachers who did not have formal authority to lead a particular initiative could seek support from whoever did have that authority. At St A in particular, this was publicly observable and common, suggesting that teachers were willing to suppress their egos and follow colleagues, as well as – presumably – feeling that they, too, could lead if they wished.

Relations with those in formal authority
The accessibility of the Headteachers and senior teachers, in particular, meant that many issues were resolved quickly. Delegated power was rarely rescinded which assisted in ensuring that issues were efficiently and effectively dealt with. Occasionally in one school there were cases where there was mistrust, and these might be explained by the fewer or more critical interactions between teacher and senior teacher; a problem with a larger staff. It would seem problematic in that teachers are unable to develop the social trust in the most powerful under these circumstances, and the most powerful are frustrated by a teacher’s apparent unco-operativeness. In this situation, the observation of senior teachers by junior teachers might help increase the variety of interactions and restore fairness upon which a new relationship might develop based on pedagogical authority and equity with all teachers in terms of being observed.

Long-service teachers
The existence of many long-service teachers may be important not only because they maintain relationships with a broad community, as occurred at St A and CGS in particular, but also because of their long term interest in the school and the pupils. Distributed power is typically held as important in democratic institutions because it encompasses more views and this may lead to better possible decisions, which are then more likely to be successfully carried out. Consensual decisions however may suppress a minority, but better, solution to a problem (Blau and Scott 1963). Thus achieving distribution of power may not be beneficial unless the group are committed to the long-term interest of the institution.

Teacher’s vision and motivations
Teachers and heads of departments in these schools often demonstrated a wider vision of education than that provided by reference to exam results. It not only extended to other aspects of their own subject, but also to other subject areas and pupils’ welfare, and was integral to how they taught or led their departments. This is at odds with what is often held as important about heads of departments’ roles by those in positions of higher authority or by managerial literature, which is strongly goal-
oriented. The conflict played out at CGS in relation to focussing on achieving level 4b in the SATS test versus enjoyment of the subject, is an example of how a pupil’s broader needs were valued over and above the immediate need of the department to achieve yet higher SATS results. This vision benefits the school, but it may also reflect alternative teacher-motivations, away from the extrinsic target-setting notions, which, by value of the culture in these schools, could be tapped into.

Social Capital

The various interactions among teachers and other community members, collectively form the school’s ‘social capital’. In Szreter’s view, while social capital is ‘not a property of individuals, per se, it is however a property of their relations with each other, occupying the abstract socio-cultural space of relationships between individuals’ (Szreter and Woolcock 2004: 665). These relationships, he suggests, must be premised upon a network of those who share norms of reciprocity, built up through repeated interactions, with the onus on the most powerful to create a sense of fairness within the network in sharing the resources.

Bridging social capital is demonstrated in these schools in the way that the organisational structures ensure that teachers from different subjects, pastoral groups, teaching experiences and responsibility positions are physically brought together, often to achieve a particular task. Arguably at St A, and to some extent CGS, bridging relationships had deepened into bonding between many teachers. At St A there were many bridging relationships between teachers and parents, possibly eased by the security of the bonding within the school. In addition, ‘linking’ – a special type of ‘bridging’ that occurs vertically within the hierarchy – was also prevalent.

At the three schools studied here, activities that are classically viewed as good practice in organisational terms, such as clarity of role and systems, appeared to have occurred not because these were directly addressed by a central initiative, but as a by-product of those using the systems working together to improve other aspects of their work, such as teaching and learning. This suggests that the direct pursuit of social capital is not necessary for it to be realised in practice. Indeed, Smyth (2001), writing with reference to informal educators, uses Putnam’s (2000) work on social capital to argue against tying activities to specific outcomes.

1 While accepting that Bourdieu’s conception of social capital differs from the Putnam/Szreter tradition that I use in this analysis, it is nonetheless interesting to note that with regard to the pursuit of social capital, this also concurs with Bourdieu’s comment that ‘profits’, in terms of social capital, are not consciously accrued; see Bourdieu, P. (2004). The forms of capital. The RoutledgeFalmer Reader in Sociology of Education, S. J. Ball. London, RoutledgeFalmer.
The development of social capital upon which the effectiveness of these organisational structures and school culture rests, was not directly addressed in any of the three schools, however there was a flexibility available that allowed the structures to grow in response to need, and die back in response to lack of use. It was possible for teachers to develop social activities associated with the school because organisational factors, such as flexible opening hours of the building or the availability of the school field for staff football, encouraged these to happen. These apparently irrelevant activities in terms of the core purpose of schools, in turn, provided a basis for interactions that included teachers from different departments, breaking down mistrust more typical of balkanised departments in schools and provided opportunities for reciprocation of trust. This trust may not be about teaching, but predisposes teachers to extend this to aspects of teaching.

The desirability of developing the norms of trust and reciprocity associated with social capital might be to improve the conditions for ‘great groups’ (Bennis and Beiderman 1997) to thrive. Bennis was interested in how groups of creative people that might typically prefer working on their own and have large egos, might work together and become ‘great groups’. Teachers might typically be viewed as creative, working in solitary to derive ‘complex skills, strategies and routines to make teaching and learning work in a wide variety of conditions’ (Hargreaves 2003: 9). By working together to share their knowledge, and be involved in what D. Hargreaves refers to as ‘mutual tinkering’ might increase effectiveness, reducing the stress and workload on individual teachers. Bennis suggested that such great groups shared a number of characteristics, not least their ability to suppress their ‘ego’, in pursuit of that common dream.

This ability to suppress ego, to work professionally with others, for a common good, is reminiscent of the situations in the three schools, the common vision being particularly clearly articulated, such as the special ethos in St A and the ‘teaching and learning’ focus of BCS. Nonetheless there are differences to Bennis’ work too. At two of the schools the teachers were largely women; and arguably, the schools were innovating ‘incrementally’ (Hargreaves 2003), rather than ‘radically’, thus sustaining a form of learning that has existed over several thousand years: that of the ‘teacher’ imparting valued ideas to a large group of ‘pupils’. This, then, suggests that the idea of groups of creative people that can suppress their ego and work together for a common good may be more common than Bennis’ work might suggest, and need not necessarily be associated with revolutionary changes.

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2 In Bennis’ study, these great groups were, in practice, working on innovative technologies, driven by a vision of what might be desirable in the future, rather than simply improving what was currently possible. The membership of these groups were also all male, unsurprisingly given the era in which some of these groups existed (when women were largely excluded from the creative workforce) or the technological/scientific bent of others (technology still having an unrepresentatively high proportion of men).
The organisational structures hold an important peripheral function to all that the teachers are able to do, and thus the possibilities that a particular organisational structure can offer will shape what a community can achieve. Most importantly it can release or hinder the potential of teachers. In these schools, the organisational and physical structures were largely supporting teachers in what they did, or at least did not hamper them from achieving what they considered important. In practice there may have been other forms of organisational structure that might have opened up new ways of working that teachers might have made use of if they were available. For example, team teaching was referred to by several teachers in all three schools as something they would enjoy, but were unable to do because of timetabling constraints.

Organisational structure and the nature of ties

Two related features of organisational structure emerged from all three schools in strong association with aspects of the learning community: the facilitation of teachers to form ‘ties’ (Granovetter 1973) of different strengths across their own community and beyond; and enablement of a variety of ‘informal’ practices that reinforced the school’s aims on a more regular basis than the formalised equivalents – for example problems being dealt with in office discussion as they arose, rather than in a performance management meeting.

Granovetter introduced the concept of the ‘strength’ of ties as:

A combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterise the tie.

(ibid: 1361)

Various studies of organisations have operationalised the notion of strength in different ways, but broadly have similar findings: ‘weak’ ties – that is, ties between mere acquaintances – are most helpful with regard to acquiring information and the dissemination of innovation (Granovetter 1985), whereas ‘strong’ ties are most useful in promoting efficient response and action. Strong ties operating among friends and close colleagues tend to create strong boundaries around the group, within which there is a shared language and values, and a set of information. Those individuals who form weak ties with similar-minded people in other groups act to ‘bridge’ the boundaries, allowing sets of information to be shared between groups.

The strong ties that existed among teachers, particularly those who shared workspaces and regularly used staffrooms, helped to support various aspects of the learning community. Where there were strong ties there was greater social trust, which in turn supported teachers in taking considered risks in
their teaching. The tendency for teachers to share mutual responsibility, rather than assigning it to a specific individual, may also result from strong ties among teachers that support mutual care and respect. The shared language and values of the teachers in each of the schools helped increase the response of the group to change or problems, as anyone who understood the culture well enough could respond to situations without seeking permission from others. For a similar reason leadership was able to be distributed, as those who understood the school culture best were also able to position themselves to lead, and in addition the increased social trust encouraged willingness to temporarily follow colleagues. However while a common language and strong ties can increase trust within the group, it can alienate those on the ‘outside’. This can be problematic both because a powerful outside group may pose a real danger to the insiders – such as parents who threaten teachers physically or litigiously - but also because it reduces the available social and cultural capital available to the school. It is therefore helpful to find ways of including others.

The plethora of weak ties that existed among teachers, and which also extended to non-teachers, encouraged this inclusion of others. These weak ties included occasional meetings and chats among individuals, such as those that occurred when attending courses. The weak ties provided a way in which the diverse talents of teachers could be employed. In part this was through encouraging increased knowledge of one another, which meant that potential collaborators who existed in other strong-tie groups could be discovered. Similarly, those teachers who enjoyed going on ‘outside’ courses to develop their learning acted as a bridge to teachers in other schools. They were able to bring new knowledge back to their school gleaned not only from the course content but also from teachers of other schools with whom they have communicated. Thus supporting teachers’ learning, and engaging the environment, embracing diversity and promoting collaboration are all associated with the large number of weak ties that different teachers made within, and outside, each school.

In effect the school structures worked to allow members to increase the number of weak ties without also losing their strong ties. This may be crucial in the continued progress of the development of the learning community. Giles and A. Hargreaves (2006) examining the sustainability of innovative schools in North America, identified that both other schools’ mistrust, and parents’ lack of understanding and support for the enterprise, contributed to attrition. By having and strengthening the ties among schools and with parents, each school’s social capital, in my research, was increased, and this should improve sustainability.

The effect of policy in schools is also of interest. Giles and A. Hargreaves (ibid) give an example of a state policy based on the practices in one school; however, in order to comply with the policy formulation the school was forced to abandon those very practices. This suggests that another aspect,
other than the strength of ties, may also be important: the formality of organisational structures, and this will be discussed further below.

The schools in this research appeared less susceptible, in terms of sustainability, to such problems, and this ability to survive in the political arena may in part be owing to their weak ties to universities\(^3\), through courses that teachers attended. Two schools, BCS and St A, had fostered ties to a distant influential university that was engaged in research on teaching and leadership for the government, unions and local authority. The school appears to have benefited from this by being more familiar with the landscape of reforms, ahead of time.

For these schools, the dense network of ties\(^4\) to the university, and through this to other schools, allowed them to engage with new ideas at a much earlier stage than when the reform was announced. For example BCS teachers were confident users of the ‘four part lesson’, whereas those at CGS were still at the stage of assessing its usefulness after the reform had been compulsorily introduced as part of the key stage three strategy. In tandem with this, the school was able to view reforms from different positions: the formally taught, their own research, as well as compliance. This opened up different ways of understanding and interpreting the reform, as well as pre-empting it. Finally, by having ties with a university, and other like minded schools, the school taps into a collective source of power that in someway equals more hierarchical ‘power’ to compel the school to operate in some other way. This would therefore give the school greater confidence in its way of working. In the state sector, ways of supporting creative response to reform allowed the schools to continue to develop their learning community ideals. In contrast, the independent school could choose to ignore (some) reforms, thus its relationship with universities were directed to keeping abreast of educational ideas, rather than educational reform.

Increasing social capital, whether bonding, linking or bridging, requires making ties, and this would appear to require time and energy, commodities of which teachers have very little. In these schools this problem was largely reduced through two mechanisms: firstly the organisational structures were supportive of informal ties, and secondly there were ‘piggybacked’ purposes associated with the most embedded forms of ties. For example, At BCS, the whole-school training days, as part of the organisational structure, provided a forum for different teachers to demonstrate their expertise, to learn from others, to informally get to know others better as equals. In turn these aided the learning community ideals of increasing social trust, fulfilled the ‘learning’ aims in a variety of different ways,

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3 In the context of these schools and the universities with which they interacted, ‘weak’ refers to the ‘occasional’ nature of relationships between teachers (the school) and lecturers (the universities). For some other schools, perhaps involved in long-term research projects, the ties may be stronger.

4 The networks attained density through having a range of ties operating between different teachers and different members of university staff, regarding a variety of issues. Thus the ties could be weak yet dense.
encouraged informal reflection on practice, encouraged temporary collaboration, and gave some teachers opportunities to lead. At the school level, this constituted increasing bonding capital, but this hides an equally important aspect: At a department level, it increased bridging capital, which provides the potential basis for cross-subject collaboration.

In all of these schools, the organisational structures were able to provide the ‘space’ for informal interactions to flourish. These interactions and the issues handled within them were valued by teachers, and this value appears to lie both in their direct use, and their ability to act as a ‘carrier’ of norms. It allowed teachers to deal with issues when required and without recourse to cumbersome time consuming formal protocols. The greater possible frequency of such interactions meant that the norms of the school were regularly being reinforced more effectively than through rhetoric or formally engineered systems. Such ties are highly dependent on voluntarism, and are therefore difficult to manage or contrive, however unless the organisational structure allow the spaces to occur, the benefits cannot accrue.

**Change and organisational structures**

Even minor changes in organisational structure could be suggested, in principle, by anyone, in these schools, but only the person with the authority to create the change (usually the Head), could actually make it. The change in structure, such as the changes in meeting structures at CGS, took place over a relatively short time-frame. The related structural practices, however, resulted from each teacher negotiating that structure to achieve his or her own requirements. This negotiation appeared to be ongoing, as was seen in the examples of ‘checking out’ well-established systems, such as the practice of the head of faculty at St A sending colleagues on as many courses as she could. In such a way, teachers were able to promote the conditions they felt they required to do their work, sometimes by testing the flexibility of the system. At other times, the structure provided opportunities for teachers to achieve some conditions – such as mutual trust and support from colleagues – without challenging the form of the structure at all. For example, teachers sharing offices were enabled to discuss ideas. The importance of the existing structure in achieving this hidden, valued, practice would suggest that altering groupings in offices would meet with opposition, as was seen when a head of department wanted to retain her desk in the shared work area at CGS. This implies that such changes might be smoother if there were mechanisms that supported the continuation of the valued practices in some other way.

**Conclusion**
The schools in this study have worked in different ways to increase the number and strength of ties operating among different types of groups and have provided both the formal means of doing this and the space for informal ones to develop. In doing so they have been able to resist the problems that face other schools. New Public Management, deriving from NIE, creates a climate that reduces ties within the system, whether they are linking, bridging, or bonding; weak or strong; or among teachers, departments or schools. By fostering competition at the expense of social trust, the NPM discourse discourages bridging ties at different levels, reducing social capital. Granovetter (1985) has argued that the weakness of NIE is that, deriving from a functionalist perspective, it fails to grapple with the social pressures that also influence people’s decision making. Consequently, unexpected problems have arisen in the New Public Management discourse model of viewing schools. In contrast learning communities define themselves in terms of aspects that cannot be seen in the New Public Management discourse. In essence these aspects need a robust network among members of the community to grow. Using social capital ideas, organisational structures take on a new role: they play a central part in the development of, and form of, the network which acts as a resource both for individual teachers and also the school, as corporate actor. As social capital increases, so the capacity to adapt to current needs builds.

References


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