School-to-School Collaboration

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School-to-School Collaboration: Learning Across International Contexts

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Contents

Section 2
Fatalist Systems

Section 3
Egalitarian Systems

Section 4
Fatalist Systems

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List of Figures & Tables

Introduction

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 4

Chapter 6

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 12

Tables

Chapter 2

Chapter 4

Chapter 6

Chapter 12

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Introduction

Paul Wilfred Armstrong and Chris Brown

Notions of networking and collaboration in education have re-emerged within the popular discourse, often in discussions surrounding solutions to the myriad of issues facing school systems globally. Such ideas are not particularly new. Indeed, there is a history and genealogy of research in this sphere that can be traced back to Kurt Lewin's work in the 1940s (Madrid Miranda & Chapman, 2021). In recent years, however, there has been a renewed interest in this area, resulting in a growing body of literature extolling the virtues of school-to-school collaboration and partnership, and the potential for such activity to facilitate: (1) educational improvement (Brown, 2020; Glazer & Peurach, 2013); (2) equity and inclusion (Ainscow, 2012; Chapman et al., 2016); and, more recently, (3) post-pandemic recovery (Brown & Luzmore, 2021; Harris et al., 2021).

Individual and organizational development and improvement through professional dialogue and partnership is, in principle, a powerful and seductive notion. Yet, in practice, there are pitfalls and barriers that often hinder or prevent purposeful collaborative activity (Chapman, 2019; Gunter, 2015; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Keddie, 2015). Moreover, as we have argued elsewhere (e.g. Armstrong et al., 2021), this remains a contested area of the wider field of education that is often terminologically vague, theoretically deficient, lacking in critical interpretation and under acknowledging of the wider contextual factors that influence how and the extent to which schools can work together. This has led to what we see as a somewhat superficial empirical foundation that evidences sporadic examples of effective collaborative practice between schools but that often presents such activity in isolation from the contexts in which it takes place.

These issues and concerns provide the catalyst for this edited collection. One which we hope will lead to a more nuanced discussion surrounding collaborative activity between schools, the many forms it can take and the conditions that influence whether, and the extent to which, such activity is meaningful. In particular, we are concerned with the contextual factors that influence school-to-school collaboration, specifically the diverse policy environments that characterize different school systems. We have attempted to throw light on this issue by examining and exploring school-to-school collaboration in 12 school systems (with an additional case study of international schools), stretching across five continents. The 13 cases presented within this book are distinctive in terms of their global locations.

School-to-School Collaboration: Learning Across International Contexts, 1–8

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At the same time, the cases are tied together through a common structure, in which the authors pay simultaneous attention to the multiple contextual aspects of the education systems in which they locate their chapters. Each author has also drawn on the same conceptual framework to discuss their context: a cohesion/regulation matrix based on the work and thinking of Hood (1998). In addition, we asked the authors to conclude their chapters with policy recommendations based on their insights of these contexts. This structure allows for a comparative analysis of the range of systems represented and the identification of conditions that can drive and restrict collaborative activity between schools across these different systems. At the same time, this book offers some practical implications for policymakers in relation to school-to-school collaboration.

The Cohesion/Regulation Matrix

School systems globally differ, both contextually and structurally, on a range of elements. To help categorize these systems, we invited authors to utilize the cohesion/regulation matrix, shown in Fig. 1, as a way to situate their school systems *vis-á-vis* the main macro- or system-level factors defining them. This matrix follows Hood (1998) and his work on the shifting nature of public service management (with Hood himself influenced by the sociologist Mary Douglas and her use of grid/group cultural theory: Douglas, 1982). In the field of education, the matrix has been used more recently by Chapman (2019) to explore how educational policy reforms of different types were likely to fare in diverse contexts and by Malin et al. (2020) to explore factors affecting teachers' uses of research in different school systems.

The *x*-axis of the matrix, social cohesion, can be understood as follows (adopted from Malin et al., 2020):

- ***Social cohesion*** refers to the institutions, norms and networks that bind societies together. Systems with high social cohesion have a higher propensity and readiness to engage in collaboration. Threats to social cohesion – which tend to result in low socially cohesive systems – are particularly likely to emerge when such structures and systems (e.g., governmental layers, labor unions, the church, universal services such as health) are dismantled and replaced with policies of deregulation and privatization (Bauman, 2013). These are the types of systematic approaches that generally place greater onus on individual agency than towards collective approaches.

The second axis, regulation, can be understood in this way:

- ***Regulation*** refers to the institutions that determine control and establish how accountability functions in a system. In a high regulation system, there is typically a dominant, hierarchical culture and associated bureaucratic controls. High regulation systems often also involve establishing 'high stakes' accountability systems associated with 'failure'; that is, systems in which not meeting particular standards can mean major penalties. By contrast, systems displaying

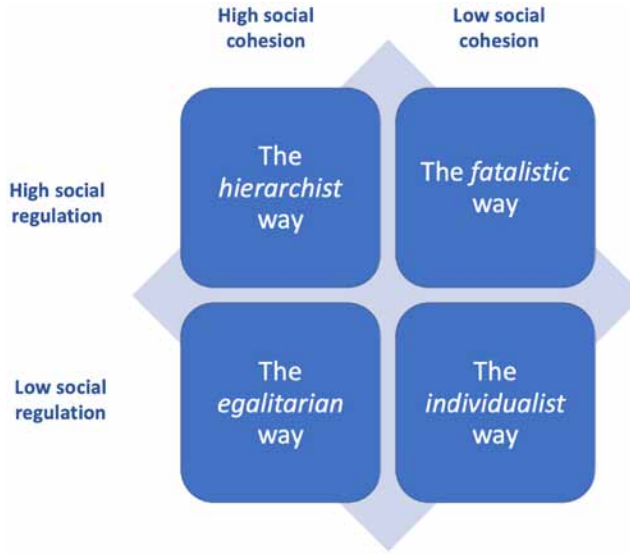

Fig. 1. The Social Cohesion/Regulation Matrix. *Source*: From Malin et al. (2020; used with permission).

low social regulation typically evidence much flatter, non-hierarchical cultures, with improvement achieved through partnership rather than, for example, top-down accountability.

As shown in Fig. 1, combinations of high/low social cohesion and high/low social regulation result in four system types (Hood, 1998, p. 9):

1. The *fatalist* way (top right quadrant): characterized by rule-bound approaches to organization, with little cooperation related to achieving sought-after outcomes.
2. The *hierarchist* way (top left quadrant): displays social cohesion and cooperation in order to meet rule-bound approaches to organization. This system is often characterized by bureaucracy.
3. The *individualist* way (bottom right quadrant): atomized approaches to organization, involving bargaining/negotiation between actors.
4. The *egalitarian* way (bottom left quadrant): high participation structures, with all decisions being negotiable, combined with an egalitarian culture and peer-to-peer support.

With the above framework in mind, each of the chapters within this volume provides a detailed, system-level analysis of patterns of collaboration within a particular context. As such, we have clustered our chapters based on their position within the cohesion/regulation matrix (see Table 1) and have organized them accordingly within this book.

Table 1. The Organization of Our Chapters.

Hierarchist systems:	*Fatalist* systems:
• New Zealand (although suggest all quadrants feature)	• Chile (with elements of *egalitarian*)
• Scotland	• Netherlands
• Canada (with elements of *egalitarian*)	• Poland
• China (with elements of *egalitarian*)	• Kenya
	• International schools network (with elements of *egalitarian*)
Egalitarian systems:	*Individualist* systems:
• Northern Ireland (with elements of *fatalist*: the shared education agenda only)	• England (with elements of *hierarchist*)
• Catalonia (with elements of *hierarchist*)	
• Germany	

Structure and Contribution

Structuring our book in this way means it can be read from beginning to end, with common threads linking each chapter. Conversely, the chapters can be read as stand-alone pieces for those readers with a particular interest in a specific context or system. As Table 1 indicates, we have tried to facilitate both by organizing the chapters into sections according to the four system typologies from the cohesion/regulation matrix. The first section encompasses systems that are predominantly *hierarchist* in nature with perspectives from New Zealand, Scotland, Canada and China. The second section looks at systems with *fatalist* characteristics and includes chapters from Chile, the Netherlands, Poland and Kenya, with an additional perspective from an international school context. The third section explores systems with *egalitarian* features with reflections from Northern Ireland, Spain and Germany while the final section looks at England from an *individualistic* perspective.

The authors have positioned their contexts within the matrix according to their knowledge of and experience and research in these systems. However, as readers will note, there is fluidity in these cases in respect of the characteristics they share with the four typologies from the cohesion/regulation matrix. We have organized the cases within the matrix according to what the authors perceived to be the dominant features of the systems in which each is located. At the same time, we have acknowledged where cases display elements of one or more of the other quadrants. Accordingly, this book provides a deeper understanding of the system-level factors that influence collaborative activity between schools within these contexts.

Our Own Conclusions

Standing alone, these chapters accordingly present the reader with contextually grounded insights and recommendations. At the same time, it is also useful to consider what can be learnt by comparing across contexts that share similarities, and we encourage readers to engage in wider forms of meaning making and draw comparisons between systems that are similar and distinctive in terms of the policy context in which each operates. We have also engaged in this process, focusing on one key question: *what can we do to achieve effective school-to-school collaboration?* In other words, how we can get educators, globally, to systematically engage with one another to improve how they lead, teach and foster children's outcomes? From our own comparative analysis, we suggest that the factors in Table 2 illustrate points of similarity and difference between systems in driving school-to-school collaboration.

Table 2. Some Overarching Themes Emerging From Our Chapters.

Quadrant	**Barriers to Collaboration**	**Enablers to Collaboration**
Hierarchist	1. A lack of perceived flexibility/balance between top down and bottom up (collaboration subsequently perceived as a threat to autonomy)	1. Adequate provision of resources (in particular time and financial resource)
	2. Perceptions of the usefulness of collaboration (or a lack thereof)	2. The presence of an infrastructure to support collaboration (for instance, the provision of brokers or facilitators)
	3. A lack of time to engage in collaboration	3. Top-down strategies and policies promoting collaboration
	4. Policy overload, which can create situations of 'initiative-itis'	4. Coordination of strategies and policies that potentially impact on collaboration
		5. The intentional cultivation of mutually respectful, trusting relationships
		6. Support for risk taking and innovation

Table 2. (*Continued*)

Quadrant	Barriers to Collaboration	Enablers to Collaboration
		7. A clear purpose and common vision associated with the collaboration
		8. A culture of joint knowledge sharing and the opening up of practices
		9. The recognition of formal and informal leadership of collaboration
Fatalist	1. Perceptions of the usefulness of collaboration (or a lack thereof)	1. Top-down strategies and policies promoting collaboration
	2. A lack of collaborative norms among main stakeholders	2. Coordination of strategies and policies that potentially impact on collaboration
	3. Lack of cooperation skills among main stakeholders	3. The intentional cultivation of mutually respectful, trusting relationships
	4. A lack of time to engage in collaboration	4. A clear purpose and common vision associated with the collaboration
		5. A culture of joint knowledge sharing and the opening up of practices
Individualist	1. The absence of performance/accountability drivers can mean few formal incentives for schools to actively collaborate	1. Top-down strategies and policies promoting collaboration
	2. A lack of collaborative norms among main stakeholders	2. Coordination of strategies and policies that potentially impact on collaboration
	3. Lack of cooperation skills among main stakeholders	3. Top-down strategies and policies promoting collaboration

Table 2. (*Continued*)

Quadrant	Barriers to Collaboration	Enablers to Collaboration
Egalitarian	1. A lack of perceived flexibility (collaboration subsequently perceived as a threat to autonomy) 2. The absence of performance/accountability drivers can mean few formal incentives for schools to actively collaborate	1. Bottom-up (e.g. teacher, school led or even community led) approaches to promote collaboration 2. The recognition of formal and informal leadership of collaboration 3. Within school strategies and policies promoting collaboration 4. Support for risk taking and innovation 5. A clear purpose and common vision associated with the collaboration 6. Adequate provision of resources (in particular time and financial resource) 7. The presence of an infrastructure to support collaboration (for instance, the provision of brokers or facilitators)

What our own findings suggest is that a range of different policy levers and factors are required, depending on the levels of cohesion and regulation within a given system. These factors tackle collaboration from a range of angles: from top-down 'compulsion' to the bottom-up recognition of the need to connect and from norm building to the provision of policies and infrastructure. Such individual factors can also apply to more than one quadrant, and there is likely to be benefit in policymakers drawing up a suite of policy levers that address the issue from a myriad of perspectives. But what is also encouraging (and should quickly become clear from reading through this volume) is that collaboration of some form or other is able to materialize in all systems, regardless of context. What prevents it from doing so therefore is not a lack of appetite for such activity among educators but often a lack of political will and/or understanding from those in power.

This collection therefore attends to the latter: it provides, for the first time ever, a comprehensive, internationally grounded, understanding of the factors that need to be considered to make collaboration a reality. All that is left now is for policy-makers and system-level actors to seize the initiative.

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