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ABSTRACT
                This study looked at the possibilities and practice
of partnerships between "clusters" of mainstream schools in the
United Kingdom collaborating to meet the special educational needs
(SEN) of their students. Collaboration between schools can take many
forms, from infrequent and short-lived interactions such as
course-work moderation, to long-term intensive relationships such as
sharing staff or equipment. Distinctions are drawn among the many
terms used to describe collaboration, including networks,
federations, and clusters. Clusters have emerged as a form of
organization for meeting students' special educational needs. Case
studies of four clusters are reported here, based on interviews with
educators and pupils supplemented by "focus group" discussions in
three regional locations. Some clusters had been initiated "top down"
by the Local Education Authority (LEA), while a small number had been
initiated "bottom up" by the schools themselves. Optimum size for
effective clusters was found to be between six and eight schools.
Clusters focusing on one aspect of SEN provision were more effective
than clusters that became large and complex. Identification of a
coordinator of the cluster was a key factor in maintenance of cluster
activity. Outcomes for pupils, teachers and other professionals,
schools, and LEA are discussed. (JDD)

Partnerships between mainstream schools in the UK to enhance provision for students with special educational needs.

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Introduction

The research reported here is part of a two-year study which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) looking at the possibilities and practice of partnerships between 'clusters' of mainstream schools in the UK collaborating to meet the special educational needs (SEN) of their students.*

Collaboration between schools

Collaboration between schools can take many forms, from infrequent and short-lived interactions, such as course-work moderation, to long-term and intensive relationships, such as sharing staff or equipment. Further, there are many terms used to describe collaboration, and all have different nuances and implications. Some of the terms most frequently used are: networks; partnerships; federations; links; clusters; consortia; and, pyramids.

Networks

These are generally understood to be loose, informal, fairly widespread linkages between schools, or between teachers in schools. Networks are often used for the exchange of ideas or for mutual support for particular groupings of teachers (for example, headteachers or subject teachers). The personal commitment of individuals to a network is not high: they join and leave as they find the need to. Networks of schools may work together on particular tasks, (for example, an exhibition of pupils' work in the local library), but once a particular task is finished the network may disband. Networks serve to break down the isolation of schools, or of individuals, but do not threaten the autonomy of schools.

Federations

At the other extreme, a federation is a permanent and extensive collaboration between a group of schools.

> Federation strictly implies the existence of some binding central authority circumscribing the individual autonomy of members. It properly describes schools merged under a single headteacher, but still on their original sites.

Benford (1988)

Federations are usually found in rural areas where a number of small primary schools are grouped together under one head teacher. With the advent of the National Curriculum in the UK and growing opposition to the closure of small village schools, federations are becoming increasingly common in some areas of the country. The 1993 Education Act has paved the way for small schools to opt out of local authority control by forming clusters with a joint governing body. One could foresee a development of this where the governing body might decide to group the schools under one headteacher.

Benford (op.cit.) comments that federations of schools are common in Sweden and are not seen as a last resort to save non-viable schools, as they often are in Britain. Federations are resourced on the basis of commitment to the viability of all the participating schools:

> *Thus there are many opportunities for an interflow of ideas and resources, exchanges of pupils and personnel, and a general broadening of experiences all round arising from a purpose-built system of management and provision in the first place....In its most advanced form the model offers an exciting balance between individuality and the strengths of co-operation.*

Benford (1988)

However, as Benford points out, schools may see the benefits of co-operation, but they would rarely recognize or desire a single unitary authority.

Clusters

Standing somewhere between the looseness of a network and the cohesiveness of a federation, one can find groupings known variously as *clusters, partnerships, consortia* or *pyramids*. Each of these terms may have slightly different connotations, but they share the characteristic of being, on the one hand, more formal and permanent in nature than networks, but less all-encompassing and controlling than federations.

For the purpose of our research, we defined a cluster as:

> *a grouping of schools with a relatively stable and long-term commitment to share some resources and decision-making about an area of school activity. The arrangements are likely to involve a degree of formality such as regular meetings to plan and monitor this activity and some loss of autonomy through the need for negotiated decision-making.*

As with federations, it was often in rural areas where the most extensive and committed clusters were to be found.

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Clusters in rural areas

The concept of clustering schools has been extensively developed in rural areas, both in Britain and elsewhere. In this situation, the stimulus behind the formation of clusters seems to be the desire to increase resources in schools in rural areas. Bray (1987) writing about school clusters in the Third World, identifies the following purposes of cluster schemes:

* *Economic*

    - *sharing of facilities*
    - *sharing of staff*
    - *bulk ordering of materials*
    - *fostering community financial support*

* *Pedagogic*

    - *allowing schools to gain access to extra resources*
    - *encouraging teacher development*
    - *promoting curriculum development*
    - *providing an environment for innovation*
    - *encouraging co-operation in school projects*
    - *encouraging pupil competition (for example in sports and exams)*
    - *integration of the different levels of schooling*
    - *integration of schools with non-formal education.*

* *Administrative*

    - *acting as a focal point to which instructions from higher levels may be sent*
    - *acting as a centre for collection of information on enrolments, staffing etc.*
    - *local decision-making for example on teacher posting and leave arrangements*
    - *improved planning*
    - *providing a better framework for teacher inspections.*

* *Political*

    - *raising consciousness about the causes of under-development and of the actions that can be taken by individuals and communities*
    - *increased community participation in decision-making*
    - *reduced regional and social inequalities*

Bray (1987)

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As can be seen from the above list, clusters in rural areas in the Third World have a wide range of purposes, some of which, at first sight, may not be applicable in a Western developed context. However, it is notable that many of the purposes of clusters can be applied to the situation of rural schools in Britain, including the administrative and political ones. The economic and pedagogic purposes are clearly similar. Small rural schools have much to gain from sharing facilities and staff, bulk ordering of materials and fund-raising within their communities. The pupils in rural schools will gair through access to extra resources and a wider peer group. There is also the opportunity for primary school pupils to become involved in a wider range of activities with a secondary school within a cluster.

The administrative tasks noted above may more usually have been carried out by the Local Education Authority (LEA), and some LEAs have grouped schools into clusters for these purposes. Since the role of LEAs has been greatly diminished by recent legislation (1988, 1992, 1993 Education Acts), there is less freedom for the LEA to influence the formation of clusters by schools. However, it may be that, in the future, the Department for Education or some new regional authority (e.g. the Funding Agency for Schools (FAS)) will find it useful to set up groupings of schools for some of the administrative purposes outlined above.

The political purposes of clusters are less overt in Britain than in Third World countries. However, there is the potential for groups of schools, with similar problems, to put pressure on LEAs or the Government. For example, in one LEA which we studied, the governors of a group of inner city primary schools had formed a cluster to put pressure on the LEA to recognize the special problems of their schools and to allocate more resources. The potential of schools to opt out in clusters may increase the pressure that clusters of schools can bring to bear on LEAs or the FAS.

Government support for collaborative work

In 1985 the UK Government of the day recognized the need to enhance the curriculum in small rural primary schools and allocated funding through the Education Support Grant (ESG) to support collaboration between schools. An evaluation of the ESG programme was carried out by Galton et al. (1991). Between 1985 and 1991, fourteen LEAs received over £7 million to fund pilot projects to experiment in ways of enriching the curriculum in small rural primary schools. Many of these projects involved collaboration between schools: ESG funding was used to provide personnel, transport, meeting places and resources which were used to create, strengthen or extend collaboration and support between schools. Thus the clusters formed as a result of the Education Support Grant provided a stimulus for sharing of resources and expertise, breaking down the isolation between

schools and teachers, enrichment of the curriculum for pupils, and the involvement of parents and governors.

This extensive evaluation (Galton et al 1991) makes a number of important points about setting up and running clusters. In particular they point to the need to take a flexible approach to clustering and the use of support staffing across clusters to allow for differences between clusters and the stages of development that they have reached. The size of clusters is important. They suggest that no more than six schools should form a cluster and that cluster groupings should not cut across other groupings in which schools might be involved. Training for those involved in co-ordination or support roles is necessary. This latter point is also made by Wallace (1988) in an article on management development in small primary schools. He makes the point that new heads of small rural schools are increasingly finding it necessary to collaborate with other heads and that not enough consideration is put into preparation for this task.

The definition of cluster used in the research

As noted above, the term 'cluster', used for the research, denotes 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 resource (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, and could include special schools. They can include outside agencies such as a health authority or local employers' organisation. Their origins can be 'top down' (i.e. initiated by the Local Education Authority (LEA),) or 'bottom up' (initiated by the schools themselves). Clusters differ from networks, in that the former are more formal and well-defined systems. They also differ from 'federations' in that the latter imply the grouping of schools under one head teacher, and therefore a greater degree of loss of autonomy (See Benford 1988)).

The emergence of clusters as a form of organisation for SEN provision.

The Fish report (ILEA 1985) which reviewed provision for pupils with SEN in the former Inner London Education Authority recommended that secondary schools and their feeder primary schools should form themselves into 'clusters' and collaborate in meeting their pupils' SENs by sharing resources. The Committee had the view that by collaborating and pooling resources in this way, ordinary schools could take on joint responsibility for meeting greater levels of need among their pupils. Given the current inherent competitiveness engendered by the 1988 Education Reform Act (England and Wales) , subsequent Circulars and impending legislation, the expectation that there might be co-operation between schools would seem to be somewhat unrealistic. However, it is

clear that schools do have problems with resourcing special educational provision from within their delegated budgets. It is also clear that LEAs cannot continue to expand the resources held centrally for making provision - more and more these will have to be delegated to schools. It may be, then, that LEAs and schools will perceive that they have more to gain than to lose in providing for special educational needs within some form of cluster system, either by the LEA delegating funding for special educational provision to a designated group of schools, or by the schools themselves pooling resources to buy in a particular form of support which they need.

Thus we have seen two types of cluster emerging: one concerned with aspects of *transition* between primary and secondary school, sometimes known as a 'pyramid' or a 'partnership' and another concerned with *sharing of resources* where scarce or expensive resources are made available through co-operation between schools.

Methodology.

The research project involved two distinct phases. The first phase involved detailed case study of the kinds of collaborative (cluster) arrangements existing among schools in a sample of four LEAs, of the processes by which clusters are set up and maintained, and an attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of a cluster approach to making provision for pupils with special educational needs. In the second phase, the intention was to explore the idea of inter-school collaboration more widely and to take into account the opportunities and constraints of present and possible future scenarios in the education system. Regional meetings were held in different parts of the country to explore these issues.

The first phase, case study research

In the first phase of the research, visits were made to four LEAs where case studies were carried out. These involved the analysis of LEA and school documents and semi-structured interviews with appropriate key people at the five different levels of our interest: LEA (officers, educational psychologists, advisers, medical personnel if appropriate); cluster (co-ordinators, support services, educational psychologists); school (headteacher, SEN co-ordinator); classroom (class teacher), pupil. About 20-30 interviews were carried out in each LEA. We were interested in focussing our questions on the effects of cluster organisation at five levels: the LEA, the cluster, the school, and the classroom and pupils. The research was structured across a time frame of (i) antecedents, (ii) processes and (iii) outcomes of the cluster. This meant that we asked questions concerning (i) the context in the LEA, the cluster and the school **before** the cluster was set up and factors which might have influenced both the decision to set up a cluster and the way in which it was set up, the **antecedents**; (ii) the early and current operation of the cluster and particularly the **processes** involved in running the cluster and the

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processes influencing its operation; and (iii) perceived **outcomes** of the cluster arrangement and reflections on its positive and negative results. We were also interested to hear from respondents about their views on the future, and about factors which might influence decisions on the part of the LEA, the cluster, the schools and of teachers about the continuation or indeed the survival of the cluster arrangements. By structuring our interviews in this way, we hoped to gain a detailed understanding of the four cluster arrangements, their workings and the effects of this form of organisation on different levels of educational provision, in particular, that for pupils with SEN.

The design and methodology for the detailed studies were derived from the work of Huberman and Miles (1984) thus using their structured approach to handling qualitative data to enable causal inferences to be drawn in school evaluation studies, by collecting data over time and attempting to link antecedent and process events with outcomes. We adapted this methodology by developing semi-structured interviews which were carried out with the key people as described above in the four case study LEAs. A common basic framework for all the interview schedules enabled us to use triangulation between respondents, and we also referred to documentation received from the LEAs and schools.

All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed and the transcriptions coded according to a coding frame designed to provide information according to antecedents, processes and outcomes, for the different levels LEA, cluster, school, classroom and pupil. These data were then sorted into code categories by a computer program designed at the Institute of Education to sort coded qualitative data. The ensuing analyses were subjected to progressive data reduction and final summary reports were sent to the relevant LEA for verification and checking.

The second phase, group discussions

Group discussions were held in three regional locations, each involving invited representatives from four LEAs in the region. Thus we were able to explore a further twelve cluster arrangements. A 'focus groups' methodology (Morgan 1988) was used. There were four such groups in each regional meeting. Each group of eight consisted of two representatives from each of four LEAs. The participants held a mixture of positions, for example education officer, adviser, educational psychologist, headteacher or governor.

The participants were briefed in advance with a short paper which described our definition of a cluster and stated that the aim of the discussion was to explore perceived benefits and the difficulties of operating clusters in the current and the future climate in education. One member of the research team facilitated each group by ensuring that the discussions covered the participants' current experience of clusters; their reaction to the working model of a cluster used by the project team and

their views about the future. Since these group discussions took place at the time when proposed new legislation was being introduced and there was considerable turbulence in the education system as a whole, comments about the future and about the effects of the current situation on collaborative arrangements were inevitably somewhat speculative and hypothetical.

The group discussions were tape recorded and subsequently analysed for themes and issues. The representatives were invited to a follow-up conference some months later at which we presented some of our main findings for verification and had further discussion of the implications of impending legislation.

In this paper we will be reporting mainly on findings derived from the four case studies, though inevitably these were enhanced by the findings from the focus groups.

The four case studies.

The characteristics of the 4 clusters we studied in detail were as follows:

	Origin	Size	Phase	Purpose	Management
Cluster 1	Top down	9 schools	Cross-phase	Behaviour + transition	Schools
Cluster 2	Bottom up	6 schools	Secondary	Behaviour	Schools
Cluster 3	Top down	25 schools	Primary	SEN resource allocation	Area education office
Cluster 4	Top down	9 schools	Cross-phase	SEN resource allocation + transition	LEA central admin

Table 1 Characteristics of Clusters.

Dimensions for describing inter-school collaboration

It became clear early on not only that there was an enormously wide range of collaborative arrangements denoted by the term cluster, but also that not all the four case study clusters conformed on all dimensions to the original definition of a cluster put forward by the research team. Clusters differed on various dimensions, including their origin/initiation, the phase and types of school involved, the nature and extent of the collaboration, the focus/purpose of the collaboration, the source of funding and the nature of the SEN provision involved in the

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collaboration. Thus some clusters had been initiated "top-down" by the Local Education Authority, while a small number had been initiated "bottom-up" by the schools themselves. This difference depended in part on the purpose of the cluster, but was also linked to the fact that at the time of the research LEAs held most of the resources and had considerable power and responsibility in the organisation of SEN provision. Some clusters were single phase, others were cross-phase, and some included special schools in the collaborative arrangements. Collaboration was substantial and extensive for some clusters while for others it was minimal; in the former clusters, for example, teachers would invest time, and the schools might invest some resource; in the latter clusters, the collaborative arrangements might be more administrative and would not involve the schools themselves in sacrificing any autonomy or committing any resource.

Since the research was carried out at a time of considerable turbulence in the education system caused by substantial national government legislation, many LEAs were reorganising themselves and their SEN provision. Cluster arrangements which had originally been set up for one purpose were being changed both in structure and purpose and new arrangements were evolving.

Dynamics of clusters- emerging themes.

From our study of the 4 clusters, and detailed analysis of the two which most closely approach our model (1 and 2), the following themes have emerged.

Size: it appears that there is an optimum size for effective clusters of between 6 to 8 schools. The two active collaborative clusters that we studied were relatively small (five and six schools respectively) whereas the larger groupings of schools had not developed any significant collaborative activity. Larger groups would make effective decision-making and accountability very difficult. On the other hand, if clusters were smaller than 6-8 schools it is unlikely that the benefits of economies of scale and access to a range of expertise within the cluster would be sufficient to make it worthwhile.

Complexity: it would appear that clusters should be kept simple. A 6-school single phase cluster focussing on one aspect of SEN provision was very effective. Schools involved in more than one cluster (i.e. a cross-phase as well as a single phase cluster) found keeping all the links going very time-consuming and would have preferred to concentrate on just one cluster. Primary schools find clusters involving a secondary school useful, but these can only be effective if there is a clear catchment area (for example in a rural area where there is only one secondary school). This suggests that successful collaboration can be maintained if projects are manageable in scope. If a project becomes large and complex, then the time taken up in meetings, the loss of control, and thus of a sense of ownership,

and the more diffuse nature of the task, might put greater strains on the collaboration.

Initiation: there needs to be a catalyst, in the form of extra fun 'ing, and a key change agent to start the cluster off. One particularly active cluster was initiated by a senior professional in the area who had strong beliefs and investment in the concept. She was able to mobilise effort and resources to achieving this end and made considerable personal investment to the project. Without this, the cost in terms of time and resources needed to set up a clus' would discourage schools from participating.

Co-ordination: 'here needs to be a key person to act as co-ordinator of the cluster. T' ' ap jears to be a key factor in the maintenance of cluster activity. Tl 3 rson must command the respect and trust both of the schools invo. ved and of the Local Education Authority. In the two most active clusters studied in detail, the coordinators acted as the interface between the work of the group and the management, both at school and at LEA levels. They supported the cluster in planning and organising the work to be done and provided accountability for the use of resources delegated to the cluster. Since the coordinaror has to act as the negotiator between the schools, it is vital that he or she is of sufficient seniority to carry out that task effectively.

Ownership: those involved in the cluster need to feel ownership of it. This will only occur if the schools involved feel they have control of the common resources of the cluster. This sense of ownership and control means that peer-group pressure will prevent any one school becoming dominant in the cluster.

Task focus: clusters which involve schools in a particular task or project are more likely to be effective than those which are merely concerned with the allocation of resources. Such tasks or projects can be time limited, but can be part of an evolving development of cluster activities.

Payoff: there must be a payoff for participating schools in order to compensate for the time and effort involved in participating in the cluster. This may be in terms of access to staff or resources which would otherwise not be available. It could also be in terms of staff development. (See below)

Staff development: participation in a cluster system is a powerful tool for staff development when that participation allows staff to exchange ideas and expertise across the schools (i.e. to undertake joint tasks). This was a major feature in two of the clusters we studied.

Effectiveness: measures of effectiveness are notoriously difficult to define. In the clusters we studied, a major gain was the improvement in communication between the schools involved in the clusters or between schools and support services. In one of the clusters there had been a

marked reduction in the numbers of children referred for statements (IEPs) over the time that the cluster had been operating.

Some outcomes of clusters

- *for pupils*

It was difficult to measure the outcome of the collaboration in terms of its effects on individual pupils. This was in part due to the timescale and scope of the research project, in part because the source of outcomes (for SEN) is difficult to isolate and to attribute. However, in general terms, positive outcomes for pupils were noted in the clusters. In one cluster, the numbers of pupils excluded from school or recommended for a statement for behaviour problems had dropped significantly since the setting up of the project. Individual children interviewed by the project team had been aware that help from the behaviour support teachers had enabled them to overcome some of their problems in school.

In another cluster, children with statements of special educational need had been enabled to remain within their local area, rather than be sent to a special school. In a third cluster, pupils had benefited from the allocation of extra resources to support them and from the closer liaison between professionals from different services, which enabled a co-ordinated approach to their problems to be taken.

Some respondents felt that children had benefited in less tangible ways:

- *for teachers and other professionals*

One of the most consistently positive outcomes for teachers and other professionals in all the clusters studied was a sense of improved communication between staff. This was highly valued, as was the breakdown of isolation which some teachers had experienced in trying to deal with pupils with SENs. Improved communication had resulted in teachers realising that the problems which they were trying to solve in relation to children with special educational needs were not peculiar to them or to their school, but were widespread. It also acted as a moderating influence, which led some teachers to realise that problems which they had thought were severe, were, in fact, relatively mild.

For many of the teachers, participation in collaborative projects had been a powerful source of development - both of their sense of capability and of their knowledge and skills in dealing with special educational needs. One project had an explicit staff development aspect, but, even in those projects which did not have this element, staff felt that they had benefited in this way.

Clusters had made the links between schools and the routes to gaining access to support more open and explicit, and staff reported that they were

now clearer about how to access extra help for pupils - even though the extra help was not always forthcoming.

- *for the schools involved*

The clusters had given the schools access to resources which they might not otherwise have had. They were able to share expertise, to learn from each other and generally to develop policies, and in some cases, provision which would support children with special educational needs. The Heads of the schools reported increased confidence and competence in the staff who had been involved. The schools in the cluster concerned with behaviour problems also reported reductions in problems of discipline.

- *for the LEA*

The cluster groupings gave the LEA a more systematic way of dealing with schools and allocating resources. This was the major administrative benefit of the clusters.

In one cluster, the scheme had become a model for the deployment of support staff for behaviour problems throughout the LEA. It had resulted in a significant drop in referrals for statutory assessment of pupils with behaviour problems from that area, which had demonstrated the potential of the scheme to reduce the rate in other areas of the LEA. In another cluster, the scheme had further enhanced the LEA's policy of creating partnerships between schools, which was particularly beneficial for small rural primary schools. This appeared to be a cost-effective way of enhancing the resources and support available to small rural schools. It also provided a smooth transition from primary to secondary school.

In the third cluster, the aim of the scheme had been to improve transition, and it appeared that the majority of pupils from primary schools transferred to a secondary school within their cluster. Additional resourcing of some schools within a cluster for pupils with statements of special educational need had enabled the LEA's policy of integration to be progressed.

The fourth case study clusters had enabled the LEA to rationalise its system for the administration of special needs provision. It had brought staff from education, health a social services together on a regular basis, and had provided the basis for a moderation of demands for support from schools within the cluster.

At all levels, inter-school collaboration was reported to have increased workloads for staff. However, the benefits of collaboration had outweighed the costs, and in all clusters studied, the balance of outcomes appears to have been positive, which was a powerful reinforcing factor in the maintenance of the collaborative activities.

Conclusions

The 1993 Education Act in the UK envisages a diminishing role for LEAs in the funding and management of schools. If ordinary schools are to be expected to cater for a wide range of special educational needs from resources delegated to them by the LEA, they may find that some pooling of resources would enable them to extend their facilities. Even though LEAs are unlikely to be able to force shotgun weddings on groups of schools to form 'top down' clusters, there is still the possibility that common problems and pressures will persuade schools that a sharing of resources will be to their benefit.

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