

S U M M E R 2 0 0 3

Pulling Together:

Transforming schools through
a collaborative learning network

Merril Haeusler

Director, The South East England Virtual Education Action Zone
(SEEVEAZ)



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Research context

A number of existing policy initiatives, including Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities, specialist schools and Beacon schools, are all designed to improve standards through collaboration between schools. Many of these policies are moving into new stages of development leading to the creation of Excellence Clusters, Primary EiC and Leading Edge Schools. The emergence of new initiatives, such as the Leadership Incentive Grant, federated schools, collegiates, 14–19 pathfinders and the NCSL’s Networked Learning Communities raises the important question: What is it we have learned in the last five years about school improvement through collaboration between schools?

This research, supported by the NCSL Research Associate Programme, has captured the learning from the South East England Virtual Education Action Zone (SEEVEAZ) in relation to school improvement through collaboration. As the collaboration developed the success of the zone became evident as schools were being transformed in a number of ways. Annual progress reports detail growth and development in leadership and school organisation as well as improvements in the quality of teaching and learning in all schools. Overall external examination results improved and schools were able to demonstrate an increase in student attendance, teacher morale, professional growth and improved retention and recruitment of teachers. Business partners, keen to be associated with ‘new thinking’, contributed nearly £1.5 million in the first three years to support innovation and change. An OFSTED inspection (March 2002) validated the progress that school leaders reported:

The overall contribution of the Zone’s activities is good. The Zone’s objectives of raising teachers’ confidence and improving their ability to teach well are being met and its activities are well-matched to the aim of improving management of schools.

The research explores two main themes:

- What are the essential characteristics for successful collaboration within a learning network?
- Does effective collaboration lead to sustainable school improvement?

The research methodology used structured interviews, analysis of quantitative data and free responses to a questionnaire from headteachers, teachers and governors. Data was collected from 14 of the 19 schools in the network. Workshops involving teachers were held in some, but not, all of the 14 schools. The research also draws upon the judgements made by the March 2002 OFSTED inspection and the information used to compile progress reports from 2000–03. Performance in statutory tests and public examinations over a window of five years, including the two years prior to the establishment of the network were analysed.

The research identifies five axioms which I believe are essential for effective collaboration. They are:

1. Collaboration succeeds when participants are willing and committed to share in an atmosphere of trust, mutual respect and support; giving and receiving as equals.
2. Leadership of any collaborative is a key factor to success.
3. Members of a network must be actively engaged in decision making and proactively embrace the opportunities it offers.
4. Collaboration is sustained when members benefit personally and professionally, and can identify a positive impact on their school, teachers and students.
5. Effective collaboration in a climate conducive to change leads to sustained school improvement.

There follows commentary arising from the research and a series of lessons which identify the key factors for success and sustainable school improvement.

Background

Successive governments over the last two decades have established schools at the centre of the education system with responsibility for their own direction, governance, target achievement and self-improvement. Schools have responded in various ways to this challenge from those that fully embrace the concept of self-management, welcoming the opportunity to take control of their own improvement, to those which continue to depend on LEAs to support them and provide direction.

Recently there has been increased pressure from a significant number of school leaders to turn the rhetoric of self-evaluation, self-management and autonomy into a reality that allows them to take even greater control of budgets and more delegated responsibility for the way in which educational outcomes for young people are delivered and achieved; if necessary bypassing the LEA altogether. Striking the balance between accountability through LEA administration and enabling increased flexibility and delegation is a vexed issue for central government, local authorities and schools. How to structure services to schools such that they maximise efficiency and resource appropriate priorities remains a challenge in an environment where school leaders increasingly demand autonomy.

The current UK government recognises that the key to sustainable change and improvement lies within the school itself. Its commitment is to find a structure which balances the flexibility for all schools to operate more autonomously, whilst maintaining strong accountability for outcomes ensuring inclusion and access for all to high quality education.

In the Government's search for sustained improvement through innovative models, collaborative networks and partnerships of different providers and agencies have become the centre of policy. The Education Act 2002 and the agenda for transforming secondary education has collaborative activity at the heart of improvement. The Government has indicated that diversity and choice remain the guiding principles for improvement within the school system, but that collaboration between schools is a necessary condition for diversity in schooling in order to deliver excellent education for all young people.

SEEEVAZ as a learning network

In mid-1999 the idea of establishing a collaboration of schools under the Government's Education Action Zone initiative encouraged four technology college headteachers to break new ground in the pursuit of school improvement. They were inspired by the challenge:

Innovation only really succeeds when we begin to see individual schools pushing at the boundaries of teaching and learning and sharing their expertise through networks of schools that are collaborating. We need to develop a sense of inter-dependence as well as independence. (Hon Estelle Morris)

The South East England Virtual Education Action Zone (SEEEVAZ) was established in April 2000 as a networked learning community before that term was coined as a new policy initiative. Their vision was to work collaboratively to identify the core elements that will transform a school, bringing about sustained change and improvement.

The mix of nine secondary and 10 primary schools located over a geographical area of 2,500 square miles and in two different LEAs with whom there is no direct involvement is unique. What is also different is that the schools vary in their socio-economic context and performance. Some of the schools are recognised as high performing, having OFSTED inspections which rate them as 'outstanding'. Others were in 'serious weaknesses' and 'special measures' when the network

was established. Others serve communities with challenging circumstances having results which require improvement and some are performing well but recognise they can improve even further. SEEVEAZ embarked on an ambitious agenda. It sought, through collaboration, to demonstrate that by establishing a clear and realistic vision, by applying resources at point of need and by harnessing the expertise of leaders within the collaboration to share effective practice, performance at all levels and in all schools will improve. The SEEVEAZ mission is to:

... build the internal capacity of schools to be responsible for their own sustainable, continuous improvement; becoming high-performing, self-evaluating, effective and efficient, striving relentlessly to ensure high quality educational opportunities and standards for students.

SEEVEAZ sought to establish a coherent model to school improvement that would be sustainable and replicable elsewhere. The principle of stronger and weaker schools improving through collaboration was established in the zone well before the current drive to transform secondary education as embodied in the Education Act 2002. It is clear that SEEVEAZ has taken on an identity quite separate from the government's conception of an 'education action zone'. The concept of the zone being a resource for schools and teachers, to secure capacity for sustained institutional improvement goes beyond the Government's drive to raise standards in low achieving schools.

The philosophy of SEEVEAZ and its approach to school improvement has been translated over the last three years into programmes with associated targets around a learning improvement model. This model reinforces the synergy between all aspects of a school's operation and relies on the connectedness of the key improvement levers of leadership, teaching, learning, curriculum, student expectations and attainment, student welfare and parent/community relationships. Underpinning these levers is the need for ongoing, high-quality professional development, the innovative use of technology to enhance teaching and learning and strategic and timely intervention identified through persistent monitoring of progress. The substance of these improvement elements can be described as the ethos or culture of the school which enables parties responsible for improvement and progress to function as a learning organisation, possessing a clear and shared vision for high achievement. The shared responsibility for improvement of all partners within the collaboration requires the expertise from within each school to contribute to the function of the collaborative group which becomes, in itself, a learning network.

Partners recognise that the network's mantra is to raise standards within each school sharing a collective responsibility to the collaborative as a whole. The uniqueness of the SEEVEAZ approach, however, lies in the way in which its member schools pursue capacity to improve as well as the processes which identify what works best and why. To lead and facilitate the collaboration and carry forward this agenda, a director with experience in school improvement and leading educational change was recruited from Victoria, Australia. An ICT manager, also from Australia, was appointed. These key figures, supported by administrative assistance, formed the core support team for the collaboration.

In July 2002 SEEVEAZ was granted an additional two years funding, extending the network to April 2005. The secondary schools in the learning network are now also part of the Leadership Incentive Grant initiative and have extended collaboration to include additional schools.

Axiom 1: Collaboration succeeds when participants are willing and committed to share in an atmosphere of trust, mutual respect and support; giving and receiving as equals

“The partnership between the schools, teachers and SEEVEAZ shows a real sense of belonging, collegiality and collaboration. This is one of the Zone’s strengths. It is clear that the schools and teachers have a sense that what they are doing is special. Teachers feel valued and appreciated and feel that they are contributing to school improvement.” (OFSTED, 2002)

Trust and mutual respect

A key characteristic of SEEVEAZ identified by those interviewed is the trust and mutual respect for each other. Members feel they are able to be heard on any matter relating to the direction of the zone. They do not feel ‘overpowered’ by any perceived status or hierarchy. The idea of being equals comes through very clearly. The face-to-face element of a number of network initiatives is cited as being important in building such trust. Inspirational conferences, excellent leadership and collaboration between colleagues in different schools, demonstration lessons, professional development and curriculum projects all contribute to the development of professional relationships through personal contact.

“There is something special in the zone that you cannot access from anywhere else. It is about professional trust, I think. It is about equal partnership of professionals working under different circumstances but toward the one aim.”

“There is continuous access to excellence given and shared in an open, professional way. There is dynamism amongst the 19 schools which we all respect and learn from.”

“SEEVEAZ has provided the most stimulating network for our leadership team to engage with. Working with innovative, stimulating and enthusiastic colleagues has regenerated our thinking and refocused our direction.”

Diversity

The diversity of schools that participate in SEEVEAZ and the openness through which they relate to each other in collaboration is seen as a major strength. The balance of high performing schools working collaboratively with those underachieving, or where performance requires improvement, provides an important synergy to improvement for all schools. Headteachers in schools in challenging circumstances state they would not wish to be part of a network comprising only of like-schools or where they were expected to collaborate to accommodate other’s agendas. They believe there is more for them to learn by having the stimulation and access to the practice and professional leadership that characterises high performing schools. Teachers also commented on the value of the diversity in stimulating them to use effective examples of others’ approaches to work in their own classrooms.

“The greatest value of this particular network, I believe, is the diversity of expertise and context of schools. This diversity provides a wide range of outstanding practice to choose from.”

“As a school with significant social deprivation and a large number of students with special educational needs, it was important for us to work with successful high achieving schools.”

“The zone has opened my eyes to the vast learning community out there, not just in zone schools, but also the study tours have shown me a global perspective.”

Sharing effective practice

The sharing of effective practice is identified as an important aspect of school improvement. Sharing and learning from each other is evident in a number of ways, some more subtle than others. At one level sharing takes place where headteachers and teachers, who have a particular area of expertise, work with colleagues to extend their knowledge. On another level, individual staff take the initiative to contact colleagues in order to learn from something they have heard about or seen in other schools or further afield. Teachers and headteachers report that colleagues willingly give time and support to each other to learn from and introduce new practice into other schools through inter-school visits, conferences and teacher forums. Equally important is the professional learning and knowledge exchange that arises from discussion at professional board meetings where members review progress, share ideas and thinking and make decisions about future resourcing to enhance improvement for their own school and the zone as a learning network as a whole.

“The whole idea of sharing effective practice is a powerful thing. You see good things happening in other schools and decide that it can be translated into your own school. SEEVEAZ has enabled this for us.”

“One of the most important influences is the way participation in SEEVEAZ makes you reflect upon your own practice. Being constantly exposed to quality educational ideas keeps you pushing your own views to the limit and recognising what can be achieved in a climate and culture of pursuing excellence. The experience of belonging to the network gives it its power. I am working toward the mission of the zone and the zone in turn is helping me to fulfil my vision for the school.”

“It is the access to excellent practice which is a feature of the zone. Working alongside schools which share ideas and welcome you to look at how they operate and how their results are achieved is what collegiality is all about.”

“The many benefits of SEEVEAZ initiatives include improvements to the ‘education diet’ which we now offer our students. This has been enhanced through increased awareness and sharing of each other’s good practice, as well as the implementation of innovations which facilitates better learning for some time to come.”

Primary and secondary relationships

Partnerships between primary and secondary schools are reported to be particularly valuable, providing many opportunities for schools to work collaboratively with mutual respect. These include the introduction of innovative transition strategies, a greater understanding and appreciation for a more seamless primary/secondary curriculum, improved middle management skills and activities that raise the expectations and aspirations of different age and abilities of pupils. Primary/secondary activities enable high quality educational and professional debate about teaching and learning and increase mutual respect between colleagues related to the nature of learning throughout the school phases. It ensures that the factors that sustain pupils’ progress and raise attainment are paramount to those involved in the collaboration.

“One of the great strengths of SEEVEAZ is the focus on headteacher professional growth. The dialogue with secondary schools and with specialist speakers of high quality has helped us analyse where the school is going and supported us in finding a way to take it forward.”

“I think we have learned from SEEVEAZ, a lot about school improvement. We have learned from the primary sector. Their more open way of dealing with things has challenged us and we have learned from them.”

“I have learned so much by watching the literacy hour. It has challenged our assumptions of what we think teachers do in primary schools.”

“I visit the primary school once a week to do some science co-ordination and I think it has had a major impact in a totally different way.”

Sense of common purpose

The common factor that binds SEEVEAZ is a like-minded determination to improve.

Headteachers agree that improvements gained through collaboration benefit all participating schools, whether they are high performing or otherwise. Experience of SEEVEAZ in high performing schools shows that they too have improved as a result of working with colleagues from a range of schools; in short, good schools get better.

“It is becoming increasingly clear that right across the board successful schools can and should be working to support other schools where they operate in less favourable circumstances. It is right that those who are influential and strong for whatever reason do help others. It is a very important professional development activity here. When staff who have worked with colleagues in other schools come back with a feeling that they have made a difference it does them a huge amount of good in every possible way.”

“SEEVEAZ has provided teachers with outstanding opportunities to move ahead of their thinking on how teaching and learning must best be conducted in the twenty-first century. We have never been in a better position to learn and to help learners.”

“There are very few ideas in this school that have not evolved out of the zone. Where we were when the zone started and where we are now in terms of the use of technology is just unbelievable. It is now just taken for granted that things will change from year to year.”

Geographical spread

Teachers, governors and headteachers identify the benefits to collaboration of a mix of schools from different LEAs with different characteristics. A wide geographical distance alleviates local competition which often undermines trust between institutions. Ideas are discussed and shared in an atmosphere of honest, open, professional debate, where there is a willingness to support each others endeavours, giving time and resources generously to the advantage of the network as a whole. Electronic communication underpins the collaboration between schools geographically separated. Some headteachers did comment that the distance might be an issue when meetings require travel but quickly countered that by adding that the level of face-to-face professional debate is a vital component of SEEVEAZ and worth the time committed to travel.

“Communication between teachers, including electronic communication is growing and proving beneficial. The zone makes consistent use of email communication to all its schools and encourages schools to contribute to its web site. There is evidence of increasing use of electronic communication and some very effective international links. The zone is particularly effective in helping schools to share good practice through its web site and conferences.” (OFSTED, 2002)

“The downside is that sometimes it is nice to see whatever you are sharing in action and the distances do prohibit that. The advantages though far outweigh that disadvantage. I think it is one of the most exhilarating things we have ever been part of and a professional movement forward for our school.”

Lessons for effective collaboration in a learning network

- Successful collaboration must be nurtured in a climate of trust, professional respect and knowledge sharing.
- Collaboration leads to greater change and improvement between voluntary professionals with a like-minded determination to improve.
- Where collaboration demonstrates mutual respect, members contribute as equals. Any perceived hierarchies soon disappear.
- Effective collaboration relies on the absence of competition, real or perceived. The more diverse the collaborative, the richer the opportunity to disseminate effective practice.
- A sense of collaborative purpose is created where a common improvement agenda is agreed early. Strengths and weaknesses in individual schools are owned and addressed collectively.
- Collaboration cannot be forced upon individuals if they are to contribute and benefit from working together.

Axiom 2: Leadership of any collaborative is a key factor to success

“The zone benefits from the energetic leadership and clear educational vision of its director and ICT manager. The zone is working well under this positive leadership. Its work is bringing benefits for school leaders and teachers. There are good relationships with and between schools. Headteachers speak positively about the benefits of being able to share experiences and focus on the strengths and weaknesses of their own approach to leadership.” (OFSTED, 2002)

Shared leadership

Governors, headteachers and teachers articulate strong ownership of SEEVEAZ and a sense of pride in shaping a network they created which provides clear and effective collective leadership. Headteachers feel empowered to raise issues and contribute to decisions that underpin the collaborative vision. Membership of executive, professional board and forum provides leadership opportunities at all levels to contribute to the dialogue. It is within these situations that collaborative expertise is harnessed. Individuals use their skills, expertise and experience to contribute to the network as a whole. Leadership within the collaboration is distributed or shared at different times for various reasons. Through formal and informal leadership, members have developed a repertoire of skills that support and sustain collaboration.

“We have always been very clear that the zone supports the direction the school wants to go. It has helped us be very clear about that direction and has given us the support, the professional development opportunities and the vision and confidence to take us forward... We are the zone.”

“I do feel that in establishing this zone, the schools were breaking new ground nationally. Much of what we are now hearing from Government in its new agenda for secondary education in particular is founded on the same principles as those identified when we developed the original concept of SEEVEAZ four years ago. I feel quite proud to have been associated with what I consider to be a groundbreaking initiative which is now being replicated across the UK in various ways.”

“Being part of SEEVEAZ has revitalised us professionally. The ongoing injection of professional development and the fact that we feel we are at the forefront of new ideas and initiatives has given us confidence as educators to make decisions about school improvement and to act on them.”

“When you start on an initiative that is based on something inspirational and you are all taken along, you are going to improve and that is where we are. The zone has given us the means by which we can do this constructively.”

Leadership and facilitation

Governors, teachers and headteachers strongly feel that effective collaboration needs to be managed, requiring the inspirational leadership of a facilitator with an educational background. Leadership through facilitation is fundamental to establishing a realistic yet challenging vision, securing commitment and ensuring joint action. The educational vision of the facilitator is crucial to gaining acceptance and commitment, maintaining the dynamics of continuous review and implementation of initiatives. Sensitive but challenging management and leadership of people provides the momentum and drive to ensure that members remain focused on the network's

vision and ensures that the relationships are such that the like-minded determination to improve does not falter.

“We rely a lot on the enthusiasm and drive of the director. The way the zone has been structured gives people at all levels a chance to be involved and contribute their skills and expertise. The director is the centre of all of this, pulling it all together.”

“Although we make the decisions ourselves the director very much guides and leads us. All members of the zone assume responsibility, not only for our own improvement but for each other and the director ensures all aspects are connected and work together.”

“The leadership of the zone has been unremittingly enthusiastic and supportive. That’s a very personal enthusiasm that has come directly from the director. She is quite the powerhouse of the push in that direction. She has pushed and pushed in a very friendly, positive way.”

“The way the zone was set up with a lean staffing structure with people who came to us from another country who had no pre-conceived ideas about what was possible and how we might do things was an absolute bonus for us. It brought that refreshing new look to everything we do. The zone’s vision, its approach and employing a director from Australia was a stroke of genius!”

Shared responsibility

Members share a collective desire to succeed and improve, not only for their own professional satisfaction, but also to “not let the zone down”. A proud, team spirit of institutional leaders is evident and where colleagues see difficulties in other schools, or where results are of concern, collective ownership of the issue emerges. Educational leadership at all levels is enhanced where the headteacher is inspirational, is an advocate for improvement and change and supports teachers to embrace change.

“The attitude in our school is that we are a SEEVEAZ school and proudly so. This has been reflected in all aspects of school life. Whilst maintaining the school’s independence we have taken on board the philosophy and aims of SEEVEAZ.”

“Dynamic leadership with clear objectives and goals that are both manageable and achievable are the key to the improvements we have made through SEEVEAZ.”

“The way our schools work collegially provides us with strength and expertise in numbers. The sharing of good practice and the ability to work towards one vision has brought governors together as well as headteachers.”

Connected leadership

An aspect of leadership arising from SEEVEAZ is that of connected leadership – leaders who constantly pursue further professional learning in order to better understand what it is that impacts directly on improving the quality of teaching and learning. These leaders make connections between cause and effect activities in their schools. Members believe that whilst resources to support the implementation of programmes are important, it is the energy of the network which constantly provides new ideas, challenges and opportunities that helps them make these connections. Joint decisions on opportunities and initiatives are made with the knowledge that they will benefit student and professional learning and add richness to the curriculum or support teachers in their work in the classroom.

“SEEVEAZ has provided increased professional development opportunities for all staff. These opportunities are focused, collaborative and based on sharing good practice. We are extending our knowledge and understanding of what works well and how we support teachers to achieve the very high expectations we have of our students.”

“Before the zone, we were beaver away in our own little corner. To be part of a network like this opens up thinking and exposes you to outstanding headteachers. The professional debate is lifted.”

“We need to keep seeking innovation. We need to keep up to speed with what is going on nationally and then try to be ahead of the game. We need to involve ourselves in research projects and continually challenge ourselves – what makes good teaching, what makes good learning? ”

Lessons for leadership

- Fundamental to successful collaboration is the inspirational leadership of a facilitator.
- Collaboration is effective when opportunities for shared leadership are identified and the skills and expertise of members are used to benefit the network as a whole.
- Collaboration should add value to the leadership of each school involved by offering challenge, advocacy and support, enabling each school to maintain its own identity whilst contributing to the identity of the network as a whole.

Axiom 3: Members of a network must be actively engaged in decision making and proactively embrace the opportunities it offers if change in schools is to be realised.

“Membership of SEEVEAZ has created opportunities for schools with different pupil profiles working on similar projects to develop productive links. Relationships between zone schools are good. Schools have formed useful links at senior management level in relation to the broader issues of school improvement. The zone is sponsoring some significant innovations in the use of ICT and improving school management. Collegiality is a strength of the zone. Zone activities are reported by teachers and management staff as significantly beneficial.” (OFSTED, 2002)

Building a team

Headteachers state that the opportunity to meet in a professional forum such as a professional board, is essential to enable effective communication, sharing of issues and decision making. The opportunity to meet regularly is seen as important professional development. Participants believe such meetings to be a mandatory part of membership of the collaboration; an explicit sign of commitment. It is within this forum that ownership of the network is consolidated, where professional expertise is exchanged, where the challenge to continually strive forward is established and where reflection and critical evaluation of one’s own aspirations and expectations takes place. It is the engine room of the network. Members conveyed disappointment with any colleagues who did not see attendance at board meetings as a priority.

“Knowing people is a strength. Three years on we know their faces and if we want to do something, or get some new ideas, then we know who to talk to – and it is nice that it is not just top tier management who know people... it is also teachers who can contact each other and learn and share.”

“It is the collective expectation of all members of SEEVEAZ that encourages me to push the leadership team and other staff to reach for higher and higher expectations. I have been inspired to raise my own aspiration as an educational leader and to influence those around me to demand the very best from our pupils.”

Establishing confidence

Those interviewed feel there is a purpose to the collaborative; a reason for its being, and a belief that it has led to change in their schools. This shared purpose is a shared desire for school improvement. The need to make decisions on initiatives and communicate values early in the zone was important. Self-evaluation and learning more about learning is a founding principle. They also feel that promises are being delivered. The provision of ICT hardware, particularly laptops, and the opportunity to participate in study tours, was seen as an important indicator that the zone would do something different for teachers. When things happen, confidence grows. The concept moves from an *ideal* to a *reality* when tangible outcomes impact in classrooms. Enthusiasm spreads, particularly in those schools where the headteacher ensures that SEEVEAZ initiatives are high on the agenda for communication to staff.

“The fact that self-evaluation is a critical principal of the zone means that teachers are much more consciously aware of what they are doing and why they are doing it.”

“The biggest change of all is the staff attitude toward innovation and the acceptance that change will inevitably happen. SEEVEAZ has provided resources and professional development which have assisted us in learning new ways of approaching our work.”

“We have been able to shape the way the school is going. We know we can’t do it all at once, but with the support of colleagues and in sharing ideas and practice, the vision is set and we can now see what we want to do and how to get there.”

“You have to have people who are committed to collegiality. It’s not just about being collegiate within the network. You need to lead a collegiate school. The main conduit of communication and motivation is the headteacher ... so they are in control of change.”

Active engagement

Members state the importance for all participants to actively engage in opportunities the network offers. This includes contributing to decisions about priorities as well as involvement in professional development. The level of engagement is measured in the degree to which leaders and teachers in schools embrace every opportunity to access ideas and resources available and to implement them in classrooms for the benefit of students. Change is most evident in those schools where headteachers energetically pursue opportunities for their teachers and students in a single-minded fashion. They epitomise the receptive leader – one who does not feel hampered by “having too much going on already” in their school. In those schools where teachers actively participate in the life of the collaborative, initiatives are implemented with energy and enthusiasm. The combined energy of the receptive leader and receptive teacher ensures effective change and improvement.

“SEEVEAZ is now comprehensively established as the driving force for school improvement at this school. Our culture has become one of grasping every opportunity and initiative that is offered and using these activities to mould and engage all pupils and staff. It has enabled us all to be brave and outward looking and to welcome new ideas.”

“It is the open-mindedness of the leadership teams in the zone. There isn’t an ‘It will never work here’ syndrome. It is ‘what else can we do?’ and ‘where are we now heading to continually improve?’”

“This staff feel involved in the zone. They feel the zone is alive in the school and that they have benefited from it, personally and professionally. Staff have grown in confidence and have felt a real part of something very special that has enhanced their professional expertise and esteem.”

“The staff has been inspired. They come back from professional development and training absolutely fired up. Everything we have been involved in connected to the zone has inspired everyone.”

Full participation

Teachers state that where there is good communication about initiatives agreed during SEEVEAZ meetings, and where there is a ‘champion’ in the school to co-ordinate, promote and follow up teacher participation in activities, there is a better understanding of what the zone is aiming to do, a greater ownership and a more enthusiastic interest in ensuring all opportunities are harnessed. Teachers feel they can take the lead and propose activities, contributing to the direction of the zone. They feel they are listened to and have a role to play.

“SEEVEAZ has put me in touch with teachers from other schools and that has allowed me to look at practices and learn new skills. We are now much better at discussing our work with each other and learning all the time. I have visited other schools and teachers have come here to look at what we are doing.”

“There are a number of examples in our school of individuals who have been energised, even inspired by collaborative projects undertaken by the zone.”

“Young staff are the future of our schools. I need to give them as many opportunities as I can to learn and grow professionally. The zone’s philosophy and the resources it has provided is the way of the future and it is my own private mission to prepare staff and support them for a fulfilling teaching career.”

Lessons for ensuring successful implementation of collaborative decisions

- Members of a collaborative are committed to implementing its vision when they contribute to decisions and agree its purpose and actions.
- Management structures for collective decision making need to be established early in order to foster transparency of decisions and enhance communication.
- Improvements occur in schools when collaboration stimulates receptive leaders to take on new ideas and inspire and support teachers to implement them.
- Teachers embrace new approaches to their teaching when the collaboration produces immediate, tangible outcomes that directly support them in the classroom.
- For collaborative decisions to be implemented in classrooms, teachers must feel part of the network’s activity, and connected to a receptive leader, recognising the benefits to themselves and their students.

Axiom 4: Collaboration is sustained when members benefit personally and professionally and can identify a positive impact on their school, teachers and students

“The improvement in both teacher and student skills has been considerable since the inception of the zone. In particular, schools in disadvantaged areas report that the investment and effective use of ICT has generated a sense of pride and achievement amongst pupils. Students have given a very good impression of themselves and the zone when discussing their involvement.” (OFSTED, 2002)

Shared support

Headteachers and teachers feel that it is professionally rewarding to work collegially towards school improvement rather than in isolation as an individual school. Members share a common language about school improvement that underpins their leadership approach. Being involved in what is seen as a ‘forward looking’ network of schools is highly motivational for all concerned. Headteachers describe the benefits they receive personally through the innovative collaboration in terms of ‘inspirational’. This is clearly important in leaders work and something they feel they are not gaining outside the collaboration. Decisions related to change and improvement within their own school are enhanced by the collective expertise within the collaborative. SEEVEAZ provides the confidence to share issues and seek advice in a climate conducive to identifying solutions through sharing the problem. Headteachers and teachers willingly take risks to translate new practice into their own school or classroom, feeling confident to manage change because there is expertise and support within the collaborative.

“For me this network is like having one school on 19 sites. There is so much to learn from each other and it is given in such a positive and trusting way.”

“We are, I feel, at a point where our staff are ready and able to work towards a twenty-first century school that they may be proud of. The infrastructure gives us all sound foundations to build upon, empowering our staff and students to aspire to even greater heights than could have been dreamed of three years ago.”

“We are very happy to have been removed from special measures in March 2002 and thank all partners within SEEVEAZ for their support. We have now been awarded a DfES School Achievement Award for our continued examination success over the past three years. Belonging to SEVEAZ has contributed to that.”

“The zone encourages and positively supports innovation – makes you think outside the box. It has given us all opportunities to develop in areas we would not have considered. It keeps pushing the boundaries.”

Professional rewards

Members state that they remain active members of the network because the professional discussion, the rigour of debate and the collective drive toward a shared outcome stimulates them to confidently drive forward their own school improvement agenda. Further, they see the benefits of SEEVEAZ programmes and resources impacting on teaching and learning. This reinforces confidence in the collaboration. Immediate tangible outcomes act as a catalyst for teachers to review their own practice. They assess what is effective and what can be replaced. Implementation of new ideas and resources leads to increased student enjoyment in their learning and this in turn motivates teachers, providing the confidence to continue to try new

approaches. Learning becomes fun and teachers' professional satisfaction is enhanced and sustained. Governors believe that SEEVEAZ has improved the morale of teachers and headteachers and increased teacher recruitment and retention rates in zone schools.

"We feel valued as professionals within the zone and the collegiality that has developed has motivated us to keep looking for more things that will help our teaching and improve the learning of our pupils."

"Being part of a group of schools and getting to know other teachers; sharing ideas and talking about your work has really been worthwhile. The zone is good at praising teachers and ensuring they feel valued."

"I think that the zone has built up its own self-momentum, which is extremely exciting and challenging. We have now reached the stage in this school where we want our work to be challenging because we know it will move us forward and know we are engaged in continuous improvement."

"Our staff enjoys the opportunity to share their expertise and the recognition by their colleagues that they are doing an excellent job."

"It has certainly helped with recruitment. Teachers that I've interviewed mention they've applied for the job because they know of our involvement with SEEVEAZ."

Professional development

Headteachers and teachers acknowledge that, central to continued involvement in the network, is the high quality of professional development and training provided by SEEVEAZ and its impact on the school. Headteachers have committed themselves to school improvement interpreted through a learning improvement model that is reflected in each school's own improvement plan. The professional development that underpins the model is central to the change agenda. When headteachers see changes in the classroom; when students are engaged in their work; when learning increasingly becomes fun and teachers demonstrate new skills, a feeling of 'can do' is generated and a confidence that new understanding is impacting on the teaching programme and the learners in a positive way.

"OFSTED saw the strides we'd made since our previous inspection where there was greater evidence of rather conventional teaching methodology. What they saw this time was a range of resources which has empowered the teacher to try new approaches. That has been a result of our partnership with SEEVEAZ."

"Being a SEEVEAZ school has influenced the way we now approach our work and continues to shape our vision of what can be achieved."

"The high quality professional development and the impact that has had, has changed leadership. It has resulted in a balance of leadership styles, which in turn gives staff a better understanding of what leadership and management is about and how they contribute to it."

"A new and improved teaching style has emerged enhancing pupil involvement and commitment. Lessons now have a new excitement and pupils are fully engaged in their learning. Pupil achievement has improved and that is due to our involvement in SEEVEAZ."

Lessons to maintain commitment to collaboration and ensure sustained improvement

- Commitment to collaboration is maintained when members see the benefits of their decisions impacting positively on teachers and students. The greatest advocates for sustained collaboration are those leaders who are able to articulate *cause-effect* improvements.
- Teachers' commitment to the collaboration is reinforced when high quality professional development and training helps translate new ideas for learning.
- Collaboration works best when there is a commonly agreed educational framework from which members can construct their own learning and translate it into their own organisation. Designing such a framework requires a common desire to better understand what it is that improves teaching and learning.
- Effective collaboration permits risk and innovation, accepts challenge, recognises individual strengths and areas for development, values people and celebrates success.

Axiom 5: Effective collaboration in a climate conducive to change leads to sustained school improvement

“SEEVEAZ has established good professional development in leadership, management, teaching and learning. Study visits are inspiring. Teachers are applying their new ideas in the classroom. High quality professional development has contributed to teachers’ self-esteem and enhancement of professionalism. New ideas have stretched their thinking. SEEVEAZ innovations have raised the expectation of teachers. A real and observable strength in schools is that teachers have their good practice disseminated and acknowledged. There is very good school/group collaboration.” (OFSTED, 2002)

Collectively, those interviewed describe significant improvements in their schools as a result of SEEVEAZ collaboration. They describe their schools as having the characteristics of a learning organisation. These characteristics relate to:

- professional learning and growth
- the way the climate and culture of the school is now receptive to change and innovation, and
- the knowledge of what it is that improves the quality of teaching and learning

“SEEVEAZ has given us a framework to make substantial improvements. It has given us a way of looking at ourselves so we can see where our problems are and to implement ways of improving. We now have well trained staff who can self-evaluate and seek strategies to improve at every level.”

“I keep on reminding teachers that there is never a point at which we say ‘Right – we’re good enough!’ There is never a point at which we accept the way we’ve always done things; and that there is a need to continually scrutinise what we’re doing and how we’re doing it in case it could be sharper and better. For me, that is the central principle at the heart of school improvement.”

Professional learning and growth

“The zone has made a distinct contribution to professional development in the areas of leadership and management and teaching and learning. Professional development is well planned and conducted. The training meets a variety of needs, including accreditation for administrative staff, support for the use of ICT and curriculum software resources, and a range of other opportunities related to improving teaching and learning. The effect of training is monitored and shows a rapid improvement in the competence and confidence of teachers to take on new ideas in teaching.” (OFSTED, 2002)

Vision and confidence

Headteachers believe that collaboration through SEEVEAZ has enabled them to more clearly shape the vision for their own school, and inspire the leadership team and teachers toward achieving what once might have been thought not possible. Headteachers and teachers describe themselves as having a more global perspective of education and learning. This has led to increased confidence in resourcing priorities, renewed energy and enthusiasm in the leadership role and a better knowledge about what influences change.

“There is no doubt that belonging to the zone has had an impact on this school. New programmes have been implemented and many have been accelerated. We have entered into areas where we would normally not have strayed.”

“I wanted to belong to a network of professional educators and leaders from across the education spectrum. If we want to encourage teachers to aspire for headship we must provide the inspiration and support. It is not just about management. It is the finer detail of leadership. That is what SEEVEAZ did for me. I feel privileged to be part of it.”

“SEEVEAZ has enhanced the lives of students and teachers by challenging their thinking and giving the practical support to enable real improvement to take place. Cross-phase liaison has reached new heights with staff working as a single team for the good of each student.”

“Being a member of the zone has changed our depth and breadth of vision. We are looking far more to horizons on a global scale and not afraid of what we might see. It has given us a rigorous and robust plan for school self-evaluation and improvement.”

“Our school self review, based on what I had learned from the zone, has had a huge impact which now has led to a more refined performance management system.”

Professional growth

Collaboration supported by professional development has led to a greater understanding of what is possible. SEEVEAZ has had a considerable impact on the professional development of nearly all the teachers in the zone. Teachers describe their professional growth in terms of what they have learned about learning, an improvement in skills, expertise and capabilities, particularly with ICT, and the difference that adopting new approaches has made to their teaching. Teachers have clearly found the opportunities for professional development of enormous benefit. Teachers attribute this learning to professional opportunities available, including sharing of effective practice with colleagues. There is a recognition across schools of a tangible improvement in the standards in teachers’ ICT competencies and confidence. This has occurred through systematic and regular training in the use of ICT and the experiential learning encouraged by the provision of hardware and software for all teachers.

“The impact of SEEVEAZ on me as a teacher is definitely bringing about changes in the classroom and improvements in learning. The children are much more engaged, eager to ask questions and keener to have a go at new things. I can see an improvement in results.”

Action research

Teachers ‘action research’ has led to innovation and change in classrooms. These initiatives engage students further in their learning and motivate teachers to develop and own innovative practice of which they are proud. It is not, however, only teachers who benefit from quality training. Staff emphasise the inclusive approach SEEVEAZ has to training that includes learning assistants and administrators. This has enabled the school to develop systems and skills which ensure all staff in the school contribute to school improvement and have an impact on learners.

“SEEVEAZ teachers are more innovative. They are making the curriculum more accessible for different learning styles and they try out new ways of doing things. They are constantly reviewing what they are doing and evaluating their own impact on learning. This is a new focus for teaching; a refreshing one – one that is making a difference to their confidence and professional satisfaction as well as children’s learning.”

“Being involved in SEEVEAZ has had a direct impact on my teaching. It has also influenced the use of ICT in my department. Everyone is now confident using a wide range of curriculum software and different technologies which have changed our approach to teaching.”

Cultural change within the school

“Good quality professional development and involvement in innovative activities have contributed to helping teachers not only to recognise their own skills but also to feel valued by others.” (OFSTED, 2002)

Whole school involvement

Governors, teachers and headteachers acknowledge a changed attitude and morale in those schools where teachers are actively engaged in SEEVEAZ activities and are familiar with the network’s vision. Evidence demonstrates that a significant cultural change has taken place in those schools where the leader is receptive and enthusiastically involves staff in opportunities for their development. Where teachers are less involved and communication within the school about the network’s activities is not communicated, the cultural change is less evident and staff less knowledgeable about new possibilities.

“SEEVEAZ has helped change the culture of the school. The methods of tracking the way students learn, in understanding the way they learn, the way classrooms are organised and lessons delivered, all have brought about a new ethos that is now embedded in our practice.”

“SEEVEAZ has developed a whole different ethos in the school. It has demonstrated what school improvement really means.”

“The culture of our school is very different because of SEEVEAZ. Our teachers expect change and relish it. They want to develop as professionals.”

Embracing change

Cultural change is demonstrated as teachers become enthusiastic about being involved in innovative practice when they take advantage of opportunities which support their work with students, and when they are keen to contribute to something they perceive as professionally rewarding. In these schools teachers feel valued. This leads to receptive teachers who embrace change because they know the leader will support them through change. An example of this is the way teachers are enthusiastically adopting ICT to enhance their teaching, trialling new curriculum software and using a range of new resources in teaching which test their traditional and more familiar approach. Receptive leaders who support receptive teachers build a climate receptive to sustainable change.

“Involvement has helped us understand what is meant by continuous improvement. We make sure that the ethos and culture of the school is entirely focused around supporting teaching and looking for cause-effect improvement. It is evident in teachers’ language.”

“The SEEVEAZ conferences are really very useful. It is good to spend time with other teachers and gain a broader spectrum across the curriculum. We are forming all sorts of links which are helping us better understand our own teaching practice and the way we can use resources, particularly ICT, to complement our teaching and further engage the children in their learning.”

“I am most grateful that my school has participated in the zone. I think it has made a tremendous difference to the teachers and students, both now and in the future. It has changed people’s thinking and changed professionalism. So, even if teachers are no longer in the zone, they will be changed people and they will carry that forever.”

Improved quality of teaching and learning

The inclusion of the results of cognitive ability tests, promoted by the zone is helping schools identify priorities for improvement. The information gained is being used to good effect along side other data. It highlights the potential of students and schools use this information constructively to extend the more able and to support those students requiring future attention. Schools are using the information well.

The improvement in teachers’ and pupils’ skills has been considerable since the inception of the zone. Some teachers who had felt that they would never use new ICT technology now have a high level of understanding and skills in its use. In most schools visited there was evidence of the purposeful use of ICT to support the curriculum. In particular schools in disadvantaged areas report that the investment and effective use of ICT has generated a sense of pride and achievement amongst pupils.

The conferences and study tours organised by the zone have contributed well to knowledge and understanding of school improvement and how to manage it. Those teachers who have been on study tours report their enthusiasm for what they have learned. Their reports have led to changes in their school’s practices. These experiences have encouraged headteachers to innovate and given them greater understanding of the use of ICT in learning. Schools appreciate the quality of the training provided.

Literacy and numeracy in primary and secondary schools is good, with inspiring use of ICT. Teachers are using skills fully and making lessons fun. New ways of making learning effective are opening up.

Many good examples of teaching which engaged and stimulated pupils were seen. Different initiatives have worked together well, for example, ICT capability is linked to developments in the monitoring of pupils’ progress.” (OFSTED, 2002)

Quality of teaching

Headteachers attribute improvement in the quality of teaching to the emphasis on monitoring teaching through robust lesson observation, developmental feedback and quality professional debate about how to continually improve. This has been a key issue for the SEEVEAZ network. Inter-school visits to observe lessons, professional training in lesson observation and the development of an agreed target for the quality of teaching across the network have all contributed to improvements which are validated by OFSTED inspections.

“It was great to be able to send assistant headteachers on lesson observation training. Things like that have really sharpened teachers’ focus on teaching and learning.”

“Being involved in SEEVEAZ has very obviously impacted on teaching in general. If you look around the school you can see its impact, especially on the abilities of teachers to take on new ideas and improve their teaching.”

Use of ICT

One of the most significant changes identified by teachers is that of the improvements evident in classrooms through the use of ICT. Improved teacher attitude, heightened enthusiasm, higher skills and expertise in using ICT are attributed to the way in which laptops, projectors, interactive whiteboards and wireless networking was introduced. The impact on improved teaching has had a very visible effect on student engagement in lessons and on teacher motivation.

“I’ve been in lessons where the teacher has been liberated by the use of ICT to enhance the lesson. That’s quite a powerful experience.”

“For me, it has been Maths. SEEVEAZ has revolutionised the way we teach it – for every single teacher in the department. We are using ICT and a range of really great software to bring Maths alive in our classrooms. Already I can see that students are fully engaged and interested and their results are improving. It’s superb!”

“From my own observation of lessons I can see what is now happening in classrooms. I can see the way teaching has improved. I can see that ICT has done wonders for teachers’ planning and assessment and for enhancing lessons. Classrooms are alive.”

“I find myself enjoying teaching more and I know that the children are enjoying their learning. They are now engaging with the ICT in new ways and this enthusiasm is obviously helping them with their own learning. There has been a massive effect on the school and I believe it has helped with recruitment.”

Analysis of data

Headteachers and teachers talk about how their ability to analyse data to inform teaching has led to improved performance of students. Schools have transformed their management information on student progress to support the overall aim of improving student learning. This has led to a reassessment of teacher expectations of student performance and a shift to assessing *for* learning. This, accompanied by information about learning styles and the introduction of the thinking skills curriculum, has generated a better understanding of how learning occurs and how different teaching approaches can improve the quality of learning and outcomes.

“For the first time there is a structured approach to data collection and analysis which is impacting on target setting. We are able to regularly review progress and monitor our achievement. We’ve swung around to using assessment for learning and we are tracking pupils individually, extending where necessary and intervening at the appropriate time. Teacher expectations of pupil performance have increased and our intervention programme is far more focused.”

“There are some very tangible improvements that have come about as a result of being part of SEEVEAZ. SATs results have improved. That is because our pupil tracking is better and pupils are actively engaged in their learning. We know we are making a difference to learning.”

“One of the major impacts the zone has had is in its work with CATs scores. They now form a major part of our assessment and teachers use CATs as an everyday part of assessment and learning.”

“SEEVEAZ has promoted an in depth look at teaching styles and learning. The provision of additional resources and shared experiences and expertise has given our teachers a real buzz.”

“The leadership team and middle managers have benefited greatly by working with other schools and sharing their experiences. This has been particularly key in the development of data analysis and more recently the introduction of Advocacy to the school for assessment, recording and reporting.”

Enhanced curriculum

The focus through collaboration and professional development on how students learn has impacted upon schools. Increased independent learning has emerged in SEEVEAZ schools as a result of student use of ICT, access to quality curriculum software, and the setting and sharing of individual targets with students. Curriculum opportunities have been assessed and widened to better meet student needs, especially in the area of vocational education.

“The development of key trainers within our staff for ICT and other key target areas for the zone has enabled our professional development programme to have a huge impact on staff, and teaching and learning. Staff working together to support each other’s learning is an emerging strength. This is in many areas having a clear impact on the students and our examination results.”

“The use of technology in the classroom, and the subsequent change to teaching, has led us to reflect on the curriculum we deliver to our students. Participation in SEEVEAZ has exposed us to a range of high-quality curriculum software which is being used to compliment traditional teaching. We have completed an entire curriculum audit examining what curriculum we are offering and to what effect. This has meant significant change to the breadth and depth of our curriculum and has not only impacted on what we teach, but also on the way we manage our resources and structure the day.”

Lessons for ensuring that collaboration leads to sustainable school improvement and change

- Collaboration needs to identify the key levers which build internal capacity for change and improvement in each school. This done, the collective expertise of the collaborative must support members in translating that knowledge into their own learning organisation.
- For a school to develop the culture of a learning organisation, energetic, forward thinking leadership must connect all elements of an improvement design and draw upon the network’s expertise and knowledge to focus single-mindedly on improving outcomes of students in their school.
- Collaboration is only as effective as the demonstrated improvements within each school in teaching and learning.
- For collaboration to establish sustained improvement in each of its member schools it must provide a platform for sharing knowledge about what it is that improves teaching and enables better learning.
- For new approaches, ideas and resources to be effectively implemented in classrooms receptive teachers must be supported and encouraged by a receptive leader and have access to high quality professional development which they value.

- Sustainable change is brought about by influencing the ethos and culture of the schools participating in the collaborative to ensure that those in schools have the confidence to sustain improvement.

Impact of collaboration and areas of learning for NCSL

In the past three years, SEEVEAZ schools have worked collaboratively within a learning network to bring about a change in their schools and an improvement in outcomes. Contributing a range of expertise, experience and educational viewpoints, they have moved from a disparate group of relatively isolated schools to a close knit professional team, able to demonstrate the impact of collaboration on pupil learning and achievement as well as the professional growth and morale of staff. The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) identifies six levels of learning as an organising framework for networked learning communities. This research provides evidence of the overall impact of the SEEVEAZ network in each of these areas of learning and the positive impact in its member schools.

1. Pupil learning

The research indicates that collaboration through SEEVEAZ has made an impact on pupil learning in a number of ways.

- The increased understanding of what factors improve teaching has led to an improvement in the overall quality of teaching (as evident in OFSTED inspections) with subsequent improvements in learning.
- A greater understanding of how students learn, supporting a variety of learning styles coupled with an understanding of the thinking skills curriculum has led to a more learning focused environment which is impacting on individuals and cohorts of students.
- A more informed approach to teacher assessment for learning and sharing this information and individual achievement targets with students, has led to greater student responsibility for their own learning.
- The introduction of ICT to enhance teaching and learning has led to increased student engagement in lessons and an improvement in learning.
- More sophisticated use of data and information related to student learning and performance has provided a more informed framework within which to set targets for achievements and identify individuals or groups which require specific learning support, including high achievers.

2. Adult learning

The impact on adult learning in SEEVEAZ schools is the single most powerful aspect of improvement.

- There are clear benefits to teachers who are engaged in collaborative activities. These teachers engage in diverse and challenging professional dialogue on issues which enhance their knowledge and understanding of leadership, teaching and learning. The learning relationships are between teachers who share a common need or are seeking solutions to common issues or who recognise that professional dialogue encourages them to challenge their own understandings and beliefs and enables them to expand their thinking.

- The enhancement of teachers professional identity and self-esteem leads to teachers feeling valued and supported. This in turn builds confidence and a willingness to innovate, take risks with their own learning and enthusiastically engage in continuous professional learning. High quality conferences, study tours, opportunities to listen to national and international experts were ways in which teachers feel their professional expertise is recognised.
- Beyond the more tangible professional skills that SEEVEAZ fosters are other skills that have improved as a result of the zone. These skills are based on a strong, professional ethos, a greater creative approach to teachers' work and a positive outlook. The emphasis on self-evaluation and professional identity is seen to have a very positive impact on teachers and indirectly on students.
- Teachers have made significant progress in terms of ICT skills, confidence and use in classrooms. For many it has transformed the way they think about learning and their teaching. This has opened up new ways for students to enjoy learning. The zone has used its web site and intranet as a portal for sharing information teaching resources. Teachers are making significant decisions about the most appropriate software and resources to use in order to complement more traditional teaching styles. This has also transformed their teaching style and approach and led to a greater use of interactive media and resources for students. Teachers' skills in producing their own curriculum materials for learning through ICT have significantly improved. Teachers are contributing to intranet web sites for within school and across the network sharing.

Leadership learning

Schools in SEEVEAZ benefit from strong leadership and the combined strength of a team of committed headteachers:

- Evidence suggests that SEEVEAZ has contributed to improvements in the leadership capacity of individual schools and the development of effective senior teams.
- Curriculum projects have provided rich leadership opportunities for teachers to learn how to lead. Opportunities are made for teachers to experience across network leadership as well as co-ordinating and managing activities within their own school.
- Shared leadership opportunities at headteacher level have enabled individuals to contribute directly to the management and success of the network in delivering its vision.
- Exposure to acclaimed national and international speakers and high quality professional development has led to a better understanding of leadership and provided teams with the confidence to lead schools through change and innovation.
- The management of the zone through the director's office is thought to aid effective leadership in that the structure is 'slim and flat'. There is an emphasis on facilitating schools and not on managing projects or hierarchies.

4. Whole-school learning

Capacity building within each school has been the basis of the SEEVEAZ mission. The research indicates a number of ways this is now beginning to embed, securing sustainable school improvement.

- It is clear that the network has impacted on critical cultural factors in schools such as attitudes of teachers, expectations about student achievement, relationships between professionals and ways of working with colleagues. This is a valuable contribution given that cultural factors are often underestimated in comparison with structural factors in school improvement processes.
- There has been effective integration between the school's individual aims and ambitions and the collective aim of the network, which provides resources and support to build upon the school's aims. Through collaboration, SEEVEAZ is well placed to contribute to whole school learning, by not only complementing what the school is aiming for but challenging and stretching its thinking in terms of potential.
- Communication by the headteacher as leader about SEEVEAZ activities contributes to whole staff commitment and the notion that all are involved in the school's journey to improve. Professional development opportunities which involve all staff, teaching and non-teaching, develop an infrastructure for learning throughout the school.

5. School-to-school learning

The value of working in collaboration with a network of schools is clearly evident. For many schools collaborative activity has broken years of relative isolation and ended a sense of insularity.

- The support that SEEVEAZ schools have provided one another is in the form of peer relationships around leadership development, curriculum projects and teaching and learning. This has proved to be particularly successful and supports recent research that shows that sharing effective practice requires dialogue and trust between mutual partners. The learning that has occurred as a result of sharing effective practice is evident in the impact on changes in curriculum offering, teaching approaches, innovative use of resources and learning opportunities for students.
- Headteachers and teachers link into different colleagues for different purposes and at various times depending on issues and needs. The willingness to learn from each other and the preparedness to give are the important factors which have enhanced school-to-school learning. The school-to-school learning is also enhanced through the effective use of ICT to support communication.
- Teachers have clearly benefited from a focus on classroom practice and an approach to professional learning that treats teachers participating in innovative projects as equal partners with as much to contribute as to take away.

6. Learning brought from further afield

SEEVEAZ has invested considerable energy and resources in learning from beyond its own context. An important factor for a learning network and learning organisations is to continue to look beyond itself and to learn from others. It is rare to find such an extensive range of wider networking opportunities in such a young initiative.

- SEEVEAZ visits beyond the network and use of technology enhances opportunities to learn, to review current practice and change to improve. The investment in technology for distance learning, the publication of online materials and resources, enabling teachers and headteachers to engage with leading experts and schools both nationally and internationally, and the provision of study tours outside the familiar context of the UK have all contributed to stimulating knowledge and understanding of learning in its widest sense.
- The impact of a diverse range of learning opportunities is evident in teachers' perceptions of high morale and motivation along with better conditions for the recruitment and retention of staff.
- SEEVEAZ has demonstrated that learning from beyond the network is not just an activity for teachers. Using ICT students are engaged in a range of 'out of zone' activities which have enabled enhanced curriculum opportunities to benefit students and expand their knowledge and understanding of learning and leadership.

Ten challenges to effective networks.

The SEEVEAZ experience has provided a very positive and replicable model for school improvement with collaboration as its core feature. It has not been without its challenges for those facilitating as well as those participating. The following section highlights the 10 key challenges that SEEVEAZ encountered; some being overcome as commitment deepened, some arising at different points in the evolution and others ongoing.

1. Involving the unwilling leader to participate in the spirit of school improvement through collaboration where there was a perception that the school was 'forced' to join the network, the tangible resources were the prime attraction for token participation.
2. Encouraging teachers to identify and celebrate effective practice. Teachers and headteachers are reluctant to showcase their practice, largely because they do not consider their work as outstanding or extraordinary.
3. Incorporating network initiatives into school improvement plans so that they form an integral part of the school's priorities and are not perceived as an 'add on' or 'additional work'.
4. Overcoming personal and professional agendas such that members appreciate the spirit of effective 'teamwork' and generously contribute to the common good.
5. Ensuring that network knowledge is translated into improvements in teaching and that the skills and expertise of teachers are drawn upon to renew and enrich that knowledge.
6. Inculcating a commitment to prompt responses and transparent and efficient communication.

7. Involving new headteachers as active network members to the ownership of a vision and commitment they have not been part of from the beginning.
8. Identifying and meeting the needs and aspirations of individual members and groups such that they benefit from collaboration and continually renew commitment.
9. Establishing and maintaining the ethos and culture of network knowledge in a climate of increasing staff mobility.
10. Stimulating the continued commitment of members to actively participate in network opportunities without the element of 'authority'.

Conclusion

This research has identified the characteristics or pre-conditions described as axioms necessary for collaboration between schools to succeed and to have an impact on their capacity to sustain improvement. Successful school collaboration is a professional relationship between a group of like-minded professionals who join together for the shared purpose of school improvement. They share the need for a forum for professional growth and stimulation and an opportunity to extend their understanding of how to improve the life opportunities for students. They are committed to a like-minded determination to improve the school and recognise that this may require a cultural change. They accept their role in managing that change and look to collective strength to help make the necessary decisions. They want to know how respected colleagues use resources and introduce practice which stimulates teaching and leads to improved student performance. In short, those involved in successful collaboration are committed professionals who are still learning about learning.

Headteachers and teachers in a successful collaboration know that sustainable school improvement goes beyond the quick fix and is not merely about providing resources or money to address deficiencies. Headteachers know that real change is about building the capacity within individual schools to implement new ideas and to change and better practice in classrooms. They know it is about building an infrastructure for learning – learning for themselves, their teachers and their students. They know that through collaboration they can reflect on their own situation and hone their thinking about ways in which to move forward their own organisations.

Leaders in schools also know that true collaboration requires of them something in return. They know they need to be generous in giving their time and expertise to an ideal which is fragile if not respected. They need to set aside any notion of ‘territorialism’ moving from the *“what’s in it for me”* to *“what is it that I can contribute?”* Some may need to be patient, perhaps tolerant, of colleagues who, because of their circumstances are not able to easily see, or implement, the solution to an issue which others have successfully addressed. They know they need to shed any idea of professional superiority, even ‘prima dona’ activity and engage in self critical collaboration with colleagues which sets aside competition, accolade or personal recognition, because the strength of a learning network is in the continued learning and knowledge sharing from all parties. They know that if they think they have nothing to learn – they will not.

Above all, headteachers need to know how to take what they learn from collaboration and build the capacity of their own learning organisation – their school. They need to recognise that education is about continued learning and that educators do not learn in isolation. They have a responsibility to empower their schools as learning organisations, for the present and to teach staff how to do it for the future. The power of collaboration and the success of a collaborative network rests with the members of a collaboration themselves – their contribution as individuals and their ability to help teachers understand how real learning takes place and what education for young people really means. With all five axioms in place, well managed and nurtured, it is not difficult to see how the transformation of secondary education through collaboration can bring about an education sector where schools, having the capacity for self-improvement, is accepted as a norm.