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# **Educational Action Research Networks as Participatory Interventions**

**by**

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## **Declaration**

The material included in this thesis is all from my own work. One aspect of this research was conducted in conjunction with research at another university but no data has been included here that I was not personally involved in collecting. Finally whilst there are publications that have come from the noted above research none of this thesis has been either published in another form, or submitted for a degree at another university.

A Townsend.

January 2010.

## **Abstract**

In 2002, the National College for School Leadership launched what was regarded as the largest educational networking programme in the world. This brought together groups of schools to collaborate over developing agreed areas of their work. This thesis outlines a research project aimed at networks who were members of this programme and whose main activity had been action research conducted by network members. This research was intended to examine, and to understand, the participatory aspects of networks of this sort.

Five overarching themes were drawn from the literature on participatory interventions and related to educational networks and to action research. The interaction of these three areas of literature provided the background against which the empirical aspects of this thesis were conducted. Based around an interpretive argument emphasising the contextual uniqueness of these networks, a case study methodology was adopted to study three networks. These three networks were those who had agreed to participate of a total of 18 that had matched the profile for selection and who had been invited to participate.

The conduct of these three case studies used a mixed method approach examining documents produced by these networks as well as collecting data through the use of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. From these three case studies overarching themes were identified in the ways that these networks related to participatory interventions. These themes specifically concerned: the approaches that these networks had taken to action research; the ways in which they had perceived and involved communities in their work; the nature of collaborative relationships in the networks; the relationship between the operation of the networks and principles of voluntarism and finally the roles of leadership in the networks. Overall, these networks presented a model by which individuals could collectively work together for a common aspiration, whilst retaining the flexibility to be relevant to local contexts.

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

This thesis is concerned with exploring the participatory aspects of action research networks in education. The use of the phrase ‘network in education’ is as varied as in the wider literature, encompassing network analysis (Otte & Rousseau, 2002) as a methodological approach, network as a metaphor for social relations (Barnes, 1954; Clyde Mitchell, 1969a), the network society as a description for societies in which information is transferred principally by electronic means (Castells, 2000; van Dijk, 2006) and networks as development strategies (O’Toole, 1997). Whilst all are relevant to this thesis, it is the final meaning of the term which is most applicable here. In particular, this thesis is concerned with the approach to networks in which groups of organisations agree to work together with an intention to collaboratively develop practices. This work is based around case studies of three action research networks, all of which were members of the Networked Learning Communities programme (Jackson, 2006; NCSL, 2002).

### ***The relevance of researching educational action research networks***

The overarching aspiration of this research was to contribute to an area believed to be under-researched (Harris & Chrispeels, 2006; Huberman, 1995) and to specifically examine educational networks which, as a part of the largest networking programme in the world at the time (NCSL, 2005c), could add to the existing knowledge base of this form of development. This thesis was intended to be based around more than just a single case study, an approach adopted in previous studies of networks, which has been criticised by some (Pennell & Firestone, 1996). In the event, 18 networks matched the criteria for selection (see chapter 3) of which three agreed to participate. This allows a level of interpretation beyond the description of one single case.

The issue of networking in education had been one of interest in several programmes across the world (see for example: Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Mullen & Kochan, 2000; Posch, 1993), so this study has international relevance. But the collaborative principles of networking also make this work relevant to other programmes where

individuals or organisations are brought together for a particular purpose. These include beacon schools (Burton & Brundrett, 2000) and specialist schools, both of which have expectations to collaborate with other schools (Gorard & Taylor, 2001), and to the creation of federations of schools in which schools work closer together, sometimes sharing governing bodies (DfES, 2003).

This study, therefore, is timely because of this interest in networking, both as a specific approach, and in the generic features of networks in bringing individuals and organisations to work together. Whilst networks are the contextual elements of this study, and so form both a conceptual and practical backdrop for this work, this is not the only conceptual area to be explored in this thesis, as outlined in the following section.

### ***The conceptual basis of this study***

As this research was focussed on the operation of educational networks, this thesis draws from concepts of networking which, as noted in the opening to this chapter, has a variety of applications (Barnes, 1954; Castells, 2000; Clyde Mitchell, 1969b). The most relevant notion of networks to this study concerns strategies to bring together organisations to engage in collaborative development. There are a number of relevant educational studies, which relate to this interpretation of network (see for example: Lieberman, 2000; Veugelers & Zijlstra, 2002) and this research draws extensively from this work. However, this research is not just interested in organisational networks but in particular is concerned with those organisational networks which adopted action research as a mechanism for networking. Whilst action research is a varied field of activity, being applied in a range of settings and emphasising varied conceptual issues (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Elliott, 1991; Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993), this thesis suggests that there are three facets evident in the diverse interpretations of action research namely: community engagement, collaboration, and individual, or reflexive, action research, which provide a conceptual basis through which to examine the action research features of these networks.

However, whilst the practical basis of this thesis is action research networks it is their relation to participatory interventions which is the main conceptual area of this thesis.

This is itself a considerable area of work drawing from literature from a range of areas including: community development (Cooke, 2001); community based participatory research (Goodman, 2001); community health research (Allison & Rootman, 1996) and participatory approaches to leadership (Plas, 1996). From this varied literature, five overarching themes are identified as follows:

1. Engaging with community perspectives.
2. The ownership and construction of knowledge.
3. Action and change orientated research.
4. Participatory approaches as a critique of positivism.
5. Power and control.

These five themes are outlined in chapter 2. Whilst they are drawn from participatory intervention literature they also have considerable parallels to the two other areas of literature reviewed in chapter 2, of action research and of networks. The identification of an action orientation is common to all three, although the details of how it is to be achieved differ in each. In outlining this action and change orientation, both action research and participatory interventions make explicit reference to Kurt Lewin (1946) as a pioneer in the field (Adleman, 1975; Cooke, 2001), whilst the publication outlining the origin of the Network Learning Communities bases part of its argument on Lewin's pioneering work (Jackson, 2002).

Similarities also arise in the aspiration of action associated with these approaches, in that they are all intended to support communities through a process of change. Engagement with communities is a theme which arises strongly in each of the three case studies. In participatory interventions, the explicit intention is that communities, which are often regarded as being in some way deprived (Park, 1999), are supported by an external facilitator in achieving change of relevance to them. In doing so, this creates a link to the participatory change projects of Lewin (1948). However, whilst teaching communities cannot be considered to be materially deprived in the same way as the social communities to which Park is referring, the intention of educational networks is still to identify communities which can be supported through a change process (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996), often by an external facilitator (Wohlstetter, Malloy, Chau, & Polhemus, 2003). Whilst the application of the concept of community might be applied to a different group, the aspirations themselves are

similar, in that they are intended to provide the opportunity for participants to identify issues of meaning to them and to achieve change which is not enforced on them by agents external to their community. This raises issues of the third theme of the ownership and construction of knowledge, and the fourth of power and control, and was an issue which also recurred across all three case study networks.

However, whilst these are similarities between the aspirations of the three areas of literature, i.e.: networks; action research and participatory interventions, the ways that they are applied, the nature of the individuals who are participating, and the process through which this change is achieved, does differ. Nonetheless these themes, drawn from participatory intervention literature, provides a conceptual basis on which to develop an understanding of the participatory features of action research networks in general and of the case study networks specifically. The three case study networks are introduced in the following section.

### ***Introduction to the case study networks***

This thesis is based around three case studies of networks, which had been a part of the Networked Learning Communities programme. Each of these was selected because of their membership of this programme, because of their interest in action research, and as a result of their agreement to take part in this work. The specific ways in which this was achieved are explored in chapter three, detailing the case study methodology adopted in this research. This section, however, provides a brief introduction to each of the networks in turn.

#### **Introduction to Network 1**

The first network case study is presented in chapter four. This network comprised 14 primary schools, at the start of this research project and at the time of application to the Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme. This network was already in operation when this application was made, indeed a part of this application outlined how, if successful in receiving funding, the network would alter its operation in line with the requirements of the NLC programme. This network had been founded around action research principles having established (prior to receiving funding)

groups of action researchers in each member school termed, ultimately, School Inquiry Groups (SIG). The term inquiry had been used in conjunction with ‘action research’. The network as a whole was supported by external facilitators, who had supported network wide events, and individual groups of action researchers in member schools, and through the appointment of an internal facilitator.

## **Introduction to Network 2**

At the time of conducting this research, Network 2 comprised thirteen schools (fourteen schools had applied to the NCSL but one had dropped out) in what was described in the network application as an area of considerable disadvantage. This group of schools had been through a period of improving test scores and pupil performance but this improvement had plateaued and the proposal submitted for NLC funding suggested that the member schools believed that this networking initiative could reignite this process of improvement. Network 2 had also identified action researchers who worked in groups. In this case these groups were organised across, rather than within, schools, as was the case in Network 1. The specific issues addressed by these groups, under the overarching topic of identifying the ‘best’ learning, had been established through consultation with teachers in all member schools, managed through a network-wide event and a resulting questionnaire. In this network, the term enquiry was used interchangeably with action research and each of these cross-school ‘enquiry’ groups had been supported by headteachers from network schools acting as ‘facilitators’. This network had also established a larger group of action researchers than other networks, with 90 participants identifying themselves as having been involved in action research (in comparison to 22 in Network 1 and 23 in Network 3).

## **Introduction to Network 3**

The final case study network comprised seven schools, of which six were secondary and one primary. This network had established ‘research partners’ in each member school to work collaboratively on action research (the phrase used by the network) projects. The initial aspiration had been to improve science teaching through collaborative action research, as this had been identified as a weakness across member

schools, and the ‘research partners’ had been organised so that one science teacher had been paired with a teacher from another subject. Of the three networks, this one therefore had the highest proportion of participants who identified themselves as having been instructed to become involved in action research. However, over the duration of the network, this focus on developing practice had changed and these original ‘research partners’ had, in most schools, then become responsible for supporting others through the process of action research, establishing within-school groups and then taking on the role of facilitator that had previously been filled by an academic, during the first year of their own action research.

### ***Aims and research questions***

The case studies of these three action research networks were based around a series of questions. The overarching focus of this research is on examining networks as mechanisms for participatory change. As a result, this research is based around the following overarching research question:

#### **In what ways can action research networks in education be considered participatory?**

Whilst this research is concerned with examining the participatory features of these networks, and in coming to judgements about the ways in which they can promote or result in participatory change, this process is relating one area of activity, networks, with another, participatory change. This comparison is achieved, not only in terms of the practice of the networks examined, but also in terms of relationships between the relevant areas of literature. This form of conceptual, aspirational and practical comparison informs six specific questions which derive from the above overarching question and which are as follows:

1. How do the aspirations of action research, and of educational networks, match those of participatory interventions?
2. In what ways are these aspirations realised in practice?
3. What part does action research play in the participatory aspects of networks?
4. How are networks organised and arranged, and how does this relate to the potential for them to be participatory?



5. How do networks relate to existing processes and structures? What are the implications for participatory aspirations of this relationship? In what ways have members engaged with the network and to what extent has this involvement been able to change the way that the network is organised and has operated?
6. In what ways has involvement in this network supported changes achieved by participants in their professional context? Is it possible to ascribe these changes to any particular features of the network?

This examination is achieved through eight chapters in total. The structure of the thesis and the aspiration of these chapters are outlined in the following, final, section of the introduction.

### ***Overview of the thesis***

This thesis documents an attempt to understand the participatory potential for action research networks through three case studies. This is achieved through eight chapters. This chapter has provided the background and rationale behind this thesis. Chapter two examines three areas of literature which are central to this work namely: participatory change; action research and networks, and, in particular, networks in educational settings. Chapter two has a number of aims. Firstly it is intended to identify the major elements of the participatory intervention literature. In this regard five main themes are identified in participatory intervention literature, and a further five critiques are highlighted. This provides a framework against which to examine the networks and other areas of literature.

The second purpose of this literature review chapter is in examining the other two areas of literature most relevant to this study, of action research and networks. To some action research is participatory research and vice versa (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a) but this literature review suggests three facets of action research which provide differing purposes and differing intentions and, therefore, alternative conceptions, which differ from the claims that action research and participatory interventions are synonymous.

The examination of network literature provides a general empirical and theoretical background to networking, but is also specific, in detailing the literature related to the Networked Learning Communities programme, operated by the National College for

School Leadership (NCSL)<sup>1</sup>, the programme that all three networks studied were members of during the conduct of this research. The conclusion of this chapter draws together the overarching issues which arise from the examination of these three aspects of literature and which then inform the design of a methodological approach for examining these networks.

The methodology adopted for the research conducted for this thesis is outlined in chapter three. This is based around four particular challenges for the research. Whilst being a part of a common programme, the flexibility offered by the NLC programme to member networks resulted in them adopting differing foci and approaches. This is the first challenge for this research and means that these networks should be examined as individual, albeit related, entities. The second challenge results from the networks as collectives of participants from member schools. This refers to exploring the meaning of these networks to participants, thus suggesting an overarching interpretive aspiration to this research. However, bearing in mind that one of the aspirations of this work is to extend beyond single cases and to make comparative comments between networks, the third challenge is to do so whilst adopting sufficiently similar methods, which enable some form of comparison of networks. The final challenge concerns the complexity of networks as objects of study. This, it is suggested, is best addressed through the adoption of a range of methods, in this case: documentary analysis, questionnaires and interviews. The details of these methods, their ethical application, and the approach taken to analysing this data, are all outlined in chapter three.

The following three chapters, i.e. chapters four to six, present the conduct of each case study network individually. As a consequence of the arguments in the methodology chapter, the outcomes of each of the data collection methods are explored individually, before being combined in the identification of a series of issues drawn from that particular case. These three chapters act as the first stage of analysis in which the particular issues are drawn from cases individually. These three chapters, therefore, do not make any explicit comparison between network cases, but rather are

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<sup>1</sup> N.B. the name National College for School Leadership (NCSL) is used throughout this thesis as this was the name of the organisation at the time of conducting this research. It should be noted that the NCSL has changed its name and, at the time of writing, is called the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services

focussed on exploring the outcomes relating to that particular case study network. Because of the individual nature of these networks, the numbers of participants, and the negotiation of access and entry, differed between them and so further details of this process is outlined in these case study chapters.

The next stage of analysis concerns comparing the outcomes of these individual case studies, and exploring the relevance of this comparison, with the literature examined in chapter two. This is achieved in the seventh chapter in this thesis in which five overarching themes are explored in comparison between cases and in relation to literature examined in chapter two. This discussion develops a view of these networks as being sufficiently flexible to provide a bridge between the specific contexts of participating schools, and the collective activity associated with 'networking'. This is achieved through a range of mechanisms, which highlight issues of collaboration, models of action research, community engagement, leadership and notions of voluntarism.

The final chapter examines this overarching ability of networks to be located in specific contexts whilst providing opportunities for participatory, collaborative, models of change which can extend beyond specific contexts. However, the challenges of this process, and the difficulties resulting from school accountability processes, are also explored. In specific relation to this thesis, this chapter also provides details of how this research relates to the research questions outlined above, and to its broader empirical and conceptual significance, thus explaining the contribution of this thesis to the body of knowledge on educational networks. One facet of this concerns the relationships between three areas of literature, of action research, of networks and of participatory interventions, which are explored in detail in the following chapter, the review of literature.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review; Participatory Intervention, Networks and Action Research**

### ***Aims of this chapter***

This thesis is concerned with exploring the participative aspects of action research networks of schools. This chapter examines the three main themes of this thesis namely: participatory interventions (including participatory research); networks (in particular Networked Learning Communities); and action research. Whilst all have particular meanings and particular applications in education, much writing on these areas of literature have been based on other fields of practice and study, such as health care and community development thus, whilst this chapter explores the breadth of these themes, drawing from some of these disparate areas, their relevance to education is emphasised.

Although being dealt with in different sections, these three themes are not completely separate. For example: action research and participatory research are closely related, indeed some authors see them as being the same (Reason & Bradbury, 2001b); the arguments used in support of educational networked learning communities explicitly refer to the historical basis of action research (Jackson, 2002); and networks are identified as being aligned with the conduct of action research (Posch, 1994). Whilst each theme is dealt with in turn, they are not isolated concepts and so are interrelated where possible. This exploration of the three themes, and their interaction, is guided by a series of questions as follows:

- What different forms of these three themes are identified by authors?
- What are the justifications for participation and participatory research and how do they relate to the justifications for Networked Learning Communities and action research?
- What effects are claimed for projects adopting these approaches?
- What theoretical arguments are used in favour of these approaches?

As the central theoretical focus of this work is on participation, this is the first of the three themes to be explored.

## ***Participation and participatory interventions***

This section explores the nature, conduct of and arguments for, particular conceptions of participation. There are a number of alternative aspects of participation that could be considered, including:

- The means by which individuals participate in research.
- Participation of citizens in democratic processes, including elections.
- Participation through other representative processes, for example through social groups.
- Participation in education, including pupil involvement in pedagogic processes and pupil ‘voice’ in school management and change.
- The conduct of participatory oriented interventions, including participatory research projects.

Of these five related perspectives on participation it is the fifth, concerning interventions in social settings with participatory aspirations, which is of most significance in this thesis<sup>2</sup>. This approach brings together issues of inclusion, community, development and change, as emphasised in the following quote from Schafft and Greenwood.

In its most general terms “participation” refers to the inclusion of a diverse range of stakeholder contributions in an on-going community development process, from the identification of problem areas, to the development, implementation and management of strategic planning. (Schafft & Greenwood, 2003: 19)

These participatory forms of intervention are intended to link research, action and participation (Winkler & Wallerstein, 2003) and are often implemented in communities by external agencies with the intention of enhancing the representation that members of those communities have in the progress of change (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). The aspects of participatory intervention and the reasoning behind it are outlined in the following section.

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<sup>2</sup> Whilst participation in research is relevant to this thesis, this is considered a methodological issue and so is discussed in the following chapter.

## **The basis and diversity of participatory interventions**

Throughout this thesis the term *participatory intervention* is used. This term covers several different participatory approaches such as: participatory research, participatory evaluation, participatory rural development etc. It is the participatory element of these approaches that relate them together and that is of most interest here and, whilst the review attempts to identify some of this diversity, it also draws from each of these areas and argues for some common themes throughout. There are two essential features that relate such approaches. The first is that they are introduced as discrete attempts to improve certain situations, and the second, that they involve people in informing and implementing this process of change, i.e. they are, by definition, participatory, as highlighted in the following quote by Park:

Participatory research is aimed at both generating knowledge and producing action, in common with other forms of action-oriented research which, unlike academic research, is driven by practical outcomes rather than theoretical understanding. There is a general understanding in action-oriented research that the people who are to benefit from the research should participate in the research process. (Park, 1999: 142-143)

This quote highlights two other features of participatory interventions, that they are conducted in social settings and that they are intended to achieve change on behalf of those individuals. This is also seen as a mechanism by which communities can gain ownership over their own context and become less dependent on the state infrastructure, for example by taking greater personal ownership of national institutions, such as the health care system (Jewkes & Murcott, 1998; Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). A participatory approach, however, is not a unified set of methods to be applied where desired, but rather is a series of principles about how research should be conducted:

Although some writers make it sound as though there is a separate ‘participatory’ research method, this is misleading. The idea of participation is more an overall guiding philosophy of how to proceed than a selection of specific methods... [i.e.] the methods being used have included an element of strong involvement and consultation on the part of the subjects of research. (Pratt & Loizos, 1992: 9)

This emphasises the place of subjects in participatory research and implies that there are greater opportunities for individuals to become involved in the entire research

process than they would do in other, less participatory, approaches. Whilst this does suggest more involvement of research subjects, the very identification of these two roles, of researcher and research subject, implies an existing hierarchy and so questions the extent of control that participants can have over the process as a whole and over the subsequent generation of knowledge.

Conceptually, researchers and researched can and should be distinguished, but from an information-content point of view, they are indistinguishable on this level of reality. The interaction is a unique and nonrepeatable event and cannot be objectified... [k]nowledge here is not knowledge regarding states or possible properties of this relationship but the relationship itself. (Levin, 1999: 37)

Participatory approaches are represented as being based on a partnership approach to the generation of knowledge and the implementation of change. Such a perspective is not without its critics, as will be explored later, but it does emphasise the centrality of relations as a part of the process of such work.

The origins of participatory research is attributed to the development of particular social movements (Borda, 2001), which were believed to combine social activism and social theory (Freire, 1970; Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). Lewin (1948) is identified as a pioneer in a number of different areas of participatory work including: community development (Cooke, 2001) community health research (Allison & Rootman, 1996) and participatory approaches to leadership (Plas, 1996). Whilst this establishes a shared background with action research (discussed later), the diversity hinted at by the differing disciplines associated with the work of Kurt Lewin emphasises the range of forms of participatory interventions described by authors. By way of illustration, some of this diversity, identified by Wallerstein and Duran (2003: 27), is outlined in Table 2.1 below.

Discipline	Related concepts
Methodologies applied in developing countries.	Rapid assessment procedures. Rapid rural appraisal. Participatory rural appraisal.
Education.	Classroom action research. Critical action research. Practitioner research.
Organisational psychology and development.	Action learning. Action science. Action inquiry. Industrial action research.
Psychology and human relations.	Cooperative, mutual or reflective practitioner inquiry.
Evaluation research.	Constructivist or fourth-generation inquiry.
Nursing.	Emancipatory inquiry.
Public health.	Popular epidemiology.
Community development / social action.	Collaborative action research. Participatory research. Emancipatory or liberatory research. Dialectical inquiry.

**Table 2.1: Alternative approaches to participatory research and development (based on Wallerstein and Duran, 2003)**

This list is not comprehensive. Attempts to enhance pupil voice in schools (see for example: Fielding, 2004; Fielding, 2007; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Hadfield & Hawe, 2001), and the participatory dimensions of pedagogy (Solomon, 2007; Tzur, 2007), could both be added to the educational aspects of this list, but it does serve to illustrate the variety of approaches in this field of work. However, in all of this diversity, the authors identify two common phrases, of action research and participatory action research, and three common goals: of research, action and education (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). These, and other arguments in justifying participatory interventions, are explored in the following section.

## **Arguments for participatory approaches**

Whilst there are a range approaches to participatory interventions, they adopt common arguments for their application. The following discussion is an attempt to explore some of these common issues, in doing so intentionally drawing on literature from a range of the differing forms of participatory interventions identified above. This discussion is structured around five related, but distinct, topics that recur in this breadth of literature. These are:



1. Engaging with community perspectives.
2. Ownership and construction of knowledge.
3. Action and change oriented research.
4. Challenging a positivistic paradigm.
5. Power and control.

These themes are not isolated. For example arguments about the ownership and construction of knowledge are, often, linked to power and control. Furthermore these arguments are also the subject of critical analysis and questions are raised of participatory interventions which are explored later. This section, however, is concerned with the arguments presented around these themes, the first of which concerns engaging with community perspectives.

### *Engaging with community perspectives*

This theme concerns an aspiration to engage, through participatory methods, with the views and perspectives of community members. The suggestion is that, in all its diversity, participatory interventions should aim at community ownership of research processes and content.

There is a general understanding in action-oriented research that the people who are to benefit from the research should participate in the research process... participatory research puts a high premium on it with its insistence that the people themselves own the entire process from beginning to end. (Park, 1999: 143)

In many cases, this approach is explicitly employed with communities that are regarded as being in some way disadvantaged and who, it is intended, will therefore benefit the most from a participatory approach.

The first tenet of participatory research is that it begins with people's problems. It is the people's needs arising in the course of daily living that call for investigation and action. Communities involved in participatory research more often than not suffer from problems ranging from material deprivations, to deteriorating social relations, to political disenfranchisement. They are disempowered in diverse ways and their needs are often urgent. (Park, 1999: 143)

This form of community engagement, whilst addressing the needs of deprived communities, is also believed to enhance the quality of research. By engaging directly with community members, the influence of the researcher is reduced, thereby producing research outcomes (practical and theoretical), which more authentically reflect the opinions of the community in question.

...we can argue that they lead to better research because the practical and theoretical outcomes of the research process are grounded in the perspectives and interests of those immediately concerned, and not filtered through an outside researcher's preconceptions and interests. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a: 3)

In this respect, the adoption of participatory interventions is a methodological consideration, although Reason and Bradbury go on to contrast this with a more principled justification for these approaches (ibid: 3). This is not unlike the aspirations of a naturalistic approach to inquiry in which studies are intended to be negotiated and situated within their natural setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and reported through detailed 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1999) of the research context. Both the participatory research and naturalistic enquiry traditions emphasise the importance of a detailed understanding of context but participatory intervention literature goes further in claiming that locating research in contexts has implications for the ownership and construction of knowledge.

### ***The ownership and construction of knowledge***

Implicit within the community engagement aspirations of participatory programmes is the development of understanding from the perceptions of communities with whom the intervention is being carried out. The argument for this is related, by some, to the construction of knowledge, and in particular the tendency of the more powerful in society to produce knowledge about the less powerful, in doing so maintaining their powerful position.

Where knowledge is produced about the problems of the powerless, it is more often than not produced by the powerful in the interest of maintaining the status quo, rather than by the powerless in the interest of change. (Gaventa, 1993: 26)

Thus one of the aspirations of participatory research is for knowledge production to be liberating and not controlling, consistent with the view of Habermas, who stated: 'In the process of enlightenment there can only be participants' (1974: 40). This is achieved by entrusting the production of knowledge to the very communities about whom it is meant to enlighten, albeit in partnership with researchers. This, it is suggested by Maguire (1987), leads not only to a more accurate reflection of 'social reality' (a methodological consideration), but also to collective action or 'mobilization', to solve social problems.

Participatory research proposes returning to ordinary people the power to participate in knowledge creation, the power that results from such participation, and the power to utilize knowledge... Participatory research assumes that returning the power of knowledge production and use to ordinary and oppressed people will contribute to the creation of a more accurate and critical reflection of social reality, the liberation of human creative potential, and to the mobilization of human resources to solve social problems. (Maguire, 1987: 39)

It is important to emphasise, however, that whilst participatory research is concerned with participation in knowledge creation, this is not simply the acceptance of community perceptions as knowledge in itself. Indeed the processes of learning and knowledge creation which arises from these participatory approaches, is believed to result in changes to the learner which ultimately challenge their initial perceptions and may change the way that they interpret their own experience (McGee, 2002). This orientation towards change is more than simply in changing perceptions, but is equally concerned with changing practices, as outlined in the following section.

### ***Action and change orientated research***

The centrality of action and change to the espoused purposes of participatory interventions is, in some senses, a reflection of a shared background with action research; indeed to some the two are synonymous:

Action research is participative research and all participative research must be action research. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a: 2)

This proposes a further methodological benefit to this action orientation as learning about social settings is believed to be enhanced by engaging in action as a part of

them (Heron, 1996) which, in turn, further results in community ownership over change.

From an instrumental standpoint, participation is thought to result in improved planning efforts because it is sensitive to and informed by detailed “local knowledge”... Local knowledge highlights the specifics of the local context, creates greater community ownership of the planning process, and commitment to planning outcomes. (Schafft & Greenwood, 2003: 19)

To Schafft and Greenwood, methodological justifications for participatory approaches are ‘instrumental’, and there are other, more principled, reasons for adopting such an approach. One of these involves empowering participants to understand, and then to take action, to free themselves from restrictive, disempowering, social structures, in doing so bringing together the development of knowledge with the action orientation of participatory interventions.

As a contextually based approach, PAR [Participatory Action Research] methodology seeks to help people within a particular timeframe and location become more familiar with and aware of the constraints that prevent them from participating fully in their communities. It seeks to enable them to take action to eliminate or minimize those constraints... Such action can lead to meaningful social change, also referred to as praxis or reflection in-action. (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2007: 333)

The action orientation of participatory research has three dimensions: firstly, engaging collectively in action, results in the more effective production of new knowledge. Secondly, such knowledge, thanks to community engagement, has a local relevance (Keough, 1998) and thirdly, through collective actions, restrictive social structures can be challenged. Thus the orientation of participatory approaches, including participatory research, is towards action for social justice, an orientation which is seen as being distinctly different than other approaches to research, as outlined in the following section.

### ***Challenging a positivistic paradigm***

The combination of the above arguments for participatory approaches is seen as a challenge to positivistic form of inquiry (Toulmin, 1990). Reason and Bradbury (2001a) explain how such an approach challenges the traditional relationship between researcher and participant by bringing the two together through participatory methods.

when we assert the practical purposes of action research and the importance of human interests; when we join knower with known in participative relationship; as we move away from operational measurement into a science of experiential qualities... we undercut the foundations of the empirical-positivist worldview that has been the foundation of Western inquiry since the Enlightenment. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a: 4)

In addition the action and social justice orientations, participatory interventions are also believed to emphasise the political dimension of research, something that positivistic approaches fail to take into account.

Community Based Research [CBR] is... an approach to research, that emphasizes the importance of collaboration, participation and social justice agendas over positivistic notions of objectivity and the idea that science is apolitical. CBR advocates argue that community involvement renders research more understandable, responsive and pertinent to people's lives. Finally, the empowering process may help individuals make lasting personal and societal change. (Flicker, Savan, Kolenda, & Mildemberger, 2008: 107)

These two arguments, taken together, suggest that participatory approaches to research are believed to be able to overcome the political separation between groups of people, and the repression suffered by some communities, by challenging the repressive nature of research itself, and by challenging the political elites who appropriate knowledge production. Furthermore participatory research is perceived to be a reflexive approach to research which challenges the very discipline, or paradigm, upon which that research is founded.

We argue that a fundamental quality of the participative worldview, which it shares with Guba and Lincoln's constructivism, is that it is self-reflexive. The participative mind... articulates reality within a paradigm, articulates the paradigm itself, and can in principle reach out to the wider context of that paradigm to reframe it. A basic problem of positivist mind is that it cannot acknowledge the framing paradigm it has created. (Heron & Reason, 1997: 274)

The essence of this argument is that the critiques that participatory researchers make of positivism, and that to some extent are used to justify or explain the unique qualities of a participatory approach, should also be visited on the paradigm of participatory research itself, thus making it a reflexive, rather than reifying, approach to research. There are three ways in which participatory approaches distinguish

themselves from traditional approaches to research: by enhancing collaboration with communities, by explicitly recognising the political dimension of research, and by adopting a reflexive methodology.

### ***Power and control***

Issues of power and control run through all of the above characteristics of participatory interventions. In relation to research, this concerns the ‘power to frame the realities of others’ (Chambers, 2002: 160), in other words to conduct, represent and write the outcomes of research and, through this, to enforce a particular perspective on others (Rowe, 1991). Participatory approaches are intended to democratise research by enabling community members to share in the process and having their voices heard in outcomes of that research (Holland & Blackburn, 1998). This goes beyond the production and dissemination of knowledge, providing, amongst other things, a challenge to the context for the intervention.

The key difference between participatory and other research methodologies lies in the location of power in the various stages of the research process. The practice of participatory research raises personal, political and professional challenges that go beyond the bounds of the production of information. (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995: 1667-1668)

Power also manifests itself in a desire to utilise participatory approaches in order to challenge the hegemonic position of traditional positivistic approaches to the construction of knowledge, and indeed in identifying knowledge as the basis for power and control.

Participatory research begins with the premise that knowledge has become the single most important basis of power and control. Furthermore, one particular form of knowledge, technical or “scientific”, has become the only legitimate form. Knowledge production has become a lucrative business. It is, in fact, a monopolized industry with knowledge itself as the commodity. (Maguire, 1987: 35-36)

The adoption of participatory approaches is intended to remove the powerful basis of externally generated knowledge, by supporting communities to develop their own understandings. Whilst this is being achieved at the level of the community, it is also believed to be individually empowering (Flicker et al., 2008), in that it results in lasting individual and community wide change.

Community participation also implies a shift of control from the researcher to the individuals or community being studied. This shift is compatible philosophically with a widely endorsed definition of health promotion as 'the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve their health'. (Allison & Rootman, 1996: 336)

However, it is also worth considering questioning the extent to which all community members are able to participate in such intervention projects. The view of some is that participatory interventions should strive to achieve '[m]aximum participation by the members of a community in knowledge creation and use' (Comstock & Fox, 1984: 109). This does emphasise something of a quandary in such approaches, that people engage in different ways and with differing levels of intensity, thus having differing effects on resulting changes. This, and other, distinctions in forms of participatory interventions are explored in the next section.

### **Forms and levels of participation**

In all the diversity, noted above, distinctions are made between differing types of participatory interventions and the extent to which they are participatory. This has led to the production of a range of typologies of participation. Nelson and Wright (1995), for example, describe three levels of participation: cosmetic; co-opting and empowering, with the higher levels being characterised by participants taking control of the projects themselves. An early example of this way of representing levels of participation was outlined by Arnstein (1969), who identifies participatory interventions as being strategies through which:

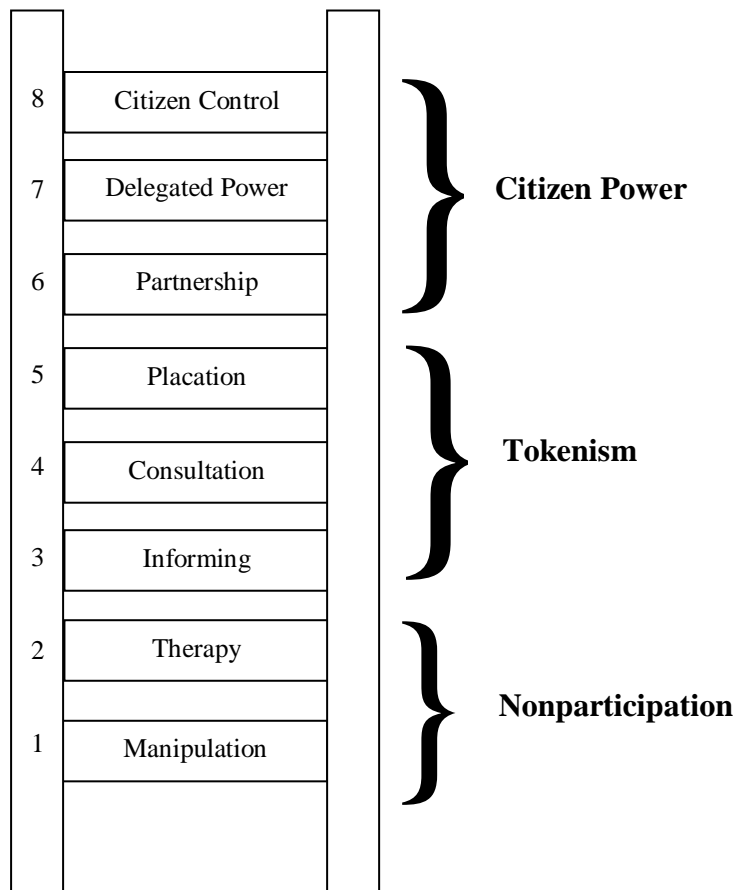
"[N]obodies"... become "somebodies" with enough power to make the target institutions responsive to their views, aspirations, and needs. (ibid: 217).

The aspiration is to enhance the influence that citizens can have over community institutions, a process Arnstein relates directly to notions of power:

[C]itizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power. It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future. It is the strategy by which the have-nots join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parceled out. In short, it is the means by which they can induce significant social reform

which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society. (Arnstein, 1969: 216)

This argument introduces the notion of equality alongside the power and representation aspects of participation. But this is not achieved through all forms of negotiation and consultation, and Arnstein goes on to outline a ladder with eight stages of participation. These steps reflect an increasing scale of power from manipulation, which is regarded as non-participation, to citizen control, which is regarded as the ultimate form of citizen power. This, eight stage, ladder is shown in Figure 2.1 below.



**Figure 2.1: A ladder of citizenship participation (Arnstein, 1969: 219)**

As shown above Arnstein grouped the eight steps into three types. The lowest level, non-participation, was described as being an externally implemented strategy intended more for purposes of control than empowerment:



[C]ontrived by some to substitute for genuine participation. Their real objective is not to enable people to participate in planning or conducting programs, but to enable powerholders to "educate" or "cure" the participants. (Ibid: 217)

The next stage, tokenism, describes attempts to give participants a voice, however this is not believed to be full participation as the outcomes of such attempts at engaging with the voices of participants are unlikely to result in change:

When they are proffered by powerholders as the total extent of participation, citizens may indeed hear and be heard. But under these conditions they lack the power to ensure that their views will be heeded by the powerful. When participation is restricted to these levels, there is no follow-through, no "muscle," hence no assurance of changing the status quo. (Ibid: 217)

The final levels of the ladder are believed to provide greater opportunities for “have-not citizens [to] obtain the majority of decision-making seats, or full managerial power” (Ibid: 217) over community developments. This is intended to result in more authentic opportunities for those citizens to participate in, and lead, developments of meaning to them.

Arnstein’s is not the only hierarchical representation of degrees of participation, indeed several other authors have proposed alternatives (see for example: Cullen, 1993; Hart, 1994). This includes two versions of a participation typology described by Pretty (1995a, 1995b) which present a scale from passive participation as the lowest level up to self mobilization as the highest level of participation, one of which is shown in Table 2.2 below.

Self- mobilization	People participate by taking initiatives independent of external institutions to change systems. Such self initiated mobilization and collective action may or may not challenge existing inequitable distributions of wealth and power.
Interactive participation	People participate in joint analysis, which leads to action plans and the formation of new local groups or the strengthening of existing ones. It tends to involve interdisciplinary methodologies that seek multiple perspectives and make use of systematic and structured learning processes. These groups take control over local decisions, and so people have a stake in maintaining structures or practices.

Functional participation	People participate by forming groups to meet predetermined objectives related to the project, which can involve the development or promotion of externally initiated social organization. Such involvement does not tend to be at early stages of project cycles or planning, but rather after major decisions have been made. These institutions tend to be dependent on external initiators and facilitators, but may become self-dependent.
Participation for material incentives	People participate by providing resources, for example labor, in return for food, cash or other material incentives. Much <i>in-situ</i> research and bio-prospecting fall in this category, as rural people provide the resources but are not involved in the experimentation or the process of learning. It is very common to see this called participation, yet people have no stake in prolonging activities when the incentives end.
Participation by consultation	People participate by being consulted, and external agents listen to views. These external agents define both problems and solutions, and may modify these in the light of people's responses. Such a consultative process does not concede any share in decision-making and professionals are under no obligation to take on board people's views.
Participation in information-giving	People participate by answering questions posed by extractive researchers and project managers using questionnaire surveys or similar approaches. People do not have the opportunity to influence proceedings, as the findings of the research or project design are neither shared nor checked for accuracy
Passive participation	People participate by being told what is going to happen or what has already happened. It is unilateral announcement by an administration or by project management; people's responses are not taken into account. The information being shared belongs only to external professionals.

**Table 2.2: A Typology of Participation (Pretty, 1995b adapted from: Adnan et al 1992)**

Both of the examples of ladders of participation shown are especially concerned with participatory interventions, in one respect concerning community projects, in the other the participation of citizens. The very highest level of participation in both is for people to implement strategies to enhance their social context, in doing so, challenging ingrained systems of power and repression. Despite their popularity, a number of criticisms are made of such typologies, indeed the authors cited above outline their own concerns over the use of such models. Critical perspectives around these, and other aspects of participatory interventions, are explored in the following section.

## **Critiques of participatory approaches**

The initial sections of this review of literature have explored the background to, arguments for and variety of participatory interventions. These are, however, contested and a number of critiques are made of participatory approaches to change and research, and the way that they are represented in literature. In this discussion these criticisms have been grouped under five themes:

- Questions over the authenticity of participatory interventions.
- The challenges of competing agendas.
- Homogenising and objectifying participant communities.
- The dominant, tyrannical, discourse of participation.
- Critiques of the hierarchical representation of participation.

### ***Questions over the authenticity of participatory interventions***

One criticism made of participatory interventions is that they do not always adopt the democratic processes or deliver the empowering outcomes that writers claim of them. An aspect of this critique challenges the notion that participation can be achieved quickly, through short-term interventions. Critics suggest, instead, that participation emerges over time, through sustained engagement, and cannot, therefore, be achieved through the limited duration and scope employed in some participatory programmes (Goodman, 2001; Greenwood et al., 1993).

There is also a suggestion that many so called ‘participatory’ approaches have a limited participatory element in comparison to other, similarly titled, methods. By way of illustration, some authors have highlighted the perceived failure of rapid rural appraisal to achieve more than simply engaging community members as informants (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). Such consultation is seen as a passive form of participation (Sinclair 2004) as community members are responding to the issues raised by researchers or facilitators, rather than taking an active part in the process. In drawing this distinction between active and passive participation, Sinclair suggests that many child participation projects are of the passive kind:

In practice the term participation is often used simply to mean being ‘listened to’ or ‘consulted’. In this sense the term takes on a very passive connotation. This is in contrast to active participation, which could be taken to imply some presumption of empowerment of those involved—that children believe, and

have reason to believe, that their involvement will make a difference. (Sinclair, 2004: 110-111)

Some participatory interventions are also believed to fail to engage community members actively. Although participatory programmes engage with the ‘voices’ of community members, possibly through participant-initiated communication, this consultation, active or otherwise, does not, of itself, ensure that change will result.

Participation in planning... is likely to be valued by the participants as a process that allows them to exchange ideas and learn more about education rather than to be seen as a means to educational change. Since the participants may see participation as an end in itself rather than as a means, they may not press for action of their products. This was observed in our study: although all planning teams completed their planning assignments and submitted proposals, they did not contact the Board or the administrators to make them respond to the proposals. A policy implication of this is that organizational changes will not necessarily follow from participatory practices. (Stromquist, 1997: 53)

An additional principle of participatory interventions is of the empowerment of ‘local people’ individually and ‘local communities’ collectively, in particular in ultimately taking ownership of the project itself. The failing seems to be that participatory programmes do not necessarily incorporate strategies to achieve ownership, being limited to consultation (Holland & Blackburn, 1998). However, participatory aspirations can also be limited by the context into which they are applied. Kamali (2007), in referring to empirical studies of participatory interventions in Iran, noted that:

Under the existing hegemonic structures in Iran achieving authentic participation is not an easy task for those involved. It is difficult for participants to be open and transparent enough to have authentic two-way communication. (Kamali, 2007: 120)

Whilst the participatory aspects of programmes can be limited by failures in design or application of projects, or by the restrictions of the context, the reliance of many such programmes on bringing together external researchers with community members, can provide challenges of its own, some of which are highlighted in the following section.

### *The challenges of competing agendas*

In many of the projects implemented with participatory aspirations, partnerships are created between community members and external facilitators, or researchers. Whilst these are intended to become empowering for participants, they also provide challenges. One problem with such an approach is that, whilst the aspiration is for the community in question to take an active part in change, it is only doing so under the auspices of a project or programme, initiated and validated from an external source. This limits the extent to which power hierarchies can be overturned as it is based upon the powerful position of the external facilitator.

However much the rhetoric changes to participation, participatory research, community involvement and the like, at the end of the day there is still an outsider seeking to change things... who the outsider is may change but the relation is the same. A stronger person wants to change things for a person who is weaker. From this paternal trap there is no complete escape. (Chambers, 1983: 141)

Furthermore, it is believed that the power differential between the external facilitator and community can itself produce a form of dependency. It is also possible that the development agenda of participatory programmes may not be consistent with the agendas of the powerful external facilitators, especially where there is an imperative for research as well as development (Humphries, Gonzales, Jimenez, & Sierra, 2000). A further component to this are tensions which are believed to result from the aspirations of external researchers to enhance their careers through their involvement with such participatory research.

One of the principles of CBPR involves recognising that both outside researchers and community members have needs and agendas, which may sometimes be shared and other times be divergent or conflicting, especially if professional researchers pursue their career advancement at the expense of the community. (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003: 33)

Whilst the pursuance of career goals may not be consistent with the ideals of participatory approaches, the democratic practices of some external facilitators, upon which much of this work is founded, has also been called into question. The suggestion, informed from empirical studies, is that whilst some facilitators feel that

participatory approaches are acceptable for working with communities, they do not necessarily believe that such ideals relate to their working practices with their peers.

However, while the development workers involved in the project attempted to enhance farmers' participation and communication and expected them to be participatory, they did not always practise democratic processes among themselves, and tended to only promote the concept of farmers' participation. Their actual practices therefore often contradicted what they were preaching. (Kamali, 2007: 120)

This raises questions over the status of participatory ideals and some suggest that participatory methods, far from being a liberating and empowering process, can become an instrument for control (Craig & Porter, 1997). Whilst participatory interventions are intended to encourage the involvement of community members in a process of change these approaches are implemented in complicated political settings with as wide a range of aspirations as there are stakeholders. Furthermore, the suggestion that one can speak of 'community aspirations' and hence of a single 'community' is challenged, as discussed in the following section.

### ***Homogenising and objectifying participant communities***

The use of the overarching term 'community' is regarded by some as a phrase which objectifies and homogenises the very groups who are intended to be freed from just such judgements through participatory processes (Cooke, 2001). The use of this term seems to imply that the community is a single entity and that it can be perceived and engaged with as such. In addition, in attempting to access or engage with community perspectives, there is an underlying assumption that these communities are harmonious (Mohan, 2001). This problem, of assuming homogeneity of communities, is highlighted by Arnstein, in recognising the limitations of the ladder shown in figure 2.1:

The ladder juxtaposes powerless citizens with the powerful in order to highlight the fundamental divisions between them. In actuality, neither the have-nots nor the powerholders are homogeneous blocs. Each group encompasses a host of divergent points of view, significant cleavages, competing vested interests, and splintered subgroups. (Arnstein, 1969: 218)

However, Arnstein goes on to say that, whilst such a generalisation has its limitations, it is justifiable, as the separate communities of the powerless and powerful, often view

each other in such general ways (Arnstein, 1969). Assumptions of homogeneity, according to Wallerstein (1999), create the danger that any attempt at participation, on the part of the community, would become tokenistic, or even worse, would themselves be exclusive, replicating the very hierarchies in the project that such participatory interventions were intended to challenge.

Communities are not monolithic, nor can they be idealized, which creates the potential for community participation itself to be token, exclusionary and with only the pretence of shared power. (Wallerstein, 1999: 41)

The limitations on the concept of a community challenges the extent to which change can be aspired on their behalf and the degree to which participants from such communities are representative of the community as a whole. The danger, therefore, is that participants become the privileged few, and that the remainder of the community do not gain similar benefits. Indeed, the very use of the term communities, or the concept of local people, is believed to be derived from colonial anthropology (Cooke, 2001), and that as a result of its increasing popularity, participation is becoming a new orthodoxy, one which worryingly reflects neo-colonial practices of externalising and objectifying the 'other' (Stirrat, 1997).

### ***The dominant, tyrannical, discourse of participation***

The levels of interest in participation, and the voracity with which the arguments are made in its defence (and in critiques of other approaches), have led to the charge that participation has become a tyrannical discourse (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). This criticism implies that the more participatory research is, the more worthy it is seen to be and emphasising, in particular, that authors producing critical analyses of participatory programmes have been largely ignored, sustaining the dominance (and hegemony) of participatory models of change. The suggestion is not that participation is a bad thing, but rather that its uncritical treatment and assumed good suppresses the voices of critics who wish to emphasise the complexity and sometimes unsatisfactory effects of such approaches. This is ironic as one of the arguments used in support of participatory research is that it is reflexive, and is better research as it is willing to apply the critical methods upon which it is founded on itself. It seems that this reflexive critique is not a consistent element of participatory methods or of the debates around them. The critical debates outlined so far all emphasise the

complexity and variety of settings and approaches for participatory interventions, these also provide the basis of criticisms of the simplistic attempts to represent the degrees or forms of participation through typologies identified above.

### *Critiques of hierarchical representations of participation*

One criticism of typologies of ladders of participation is that, whilst recognising that participation may have different forms, and occurs with different levels of engagement, they assume that higher levels are better, and are therefore to be universally aspired to. The alternative suggestion is that different forms of participation are appropriate for different situations (Sinclair, 2004). Thus, rather than constantly striving for the highest level of participation, participatory aspirations should be examined and amended according to the context for and aspirations of the project or programme in question (Bennett & Roberts, 2004).

The danger of such a suggestion is that it might lead to relativism and the possibility of double standards, with one 'level' of participation suitable for one group of people, whilst another is judged, subjectively, to be appropriate for another. If, however, participation is viewed as a right, and the democratizing process is tied closely to the enhancement of social justice, then it seems contradictory to suggest that some people, under certain circumstances, should be deprived of the opportunity to participate. Yet, it would be facile to suggest that people should have equal expectations for participation in all elements of life. Indeed what these critiques of ladders, or levels, of participation serve to suggest, more strongly than anything, is simply that participation and participatory processes are complex, and that the best use of such models is as a stimulus for critique and debate, the very purpose for which many were intended (Arnstein, 1969).

Despite the claim that participation has become a tyrannical, uncritical discourse, there seems to be a variety of criticisms made of these approaches. Whilst these may not be commonly used or referred to in the practices delivered under participatory auspices, they do serve to challenge the simplistic assumed good of participation and encourage a more complex view of this work.



## **Implications for a study of participation through action research networks**

This thesis is concerned with exploring the participatory elements of action research networks, in particular those belonging to the Networked Learning Communities (NLCs). The conduct of participatory interventions, whilst popular in many areas of research and practice, including action research, is not specifically linked to the establishment and operation of educational networks and of the NLCs themselves. The purpose of the preceding section was to explore some of the claims, issues and debates around participatory interventions so that these same arguments can be contrasted against those relating to educational networks and the NLCs themselves. The following section is intended to draw together some of the key themes from the earlier discussion. For this discussion, a number of issues have been emphasised, against which the literature referring to networking can then be interrogated. In particular this is guided by a series of questions as follows:

1. What justifications and arguments are made for educational networks, and how do these relate to participatory interventions and associated arguments?
2. To what extent, and in what ways, can networks be considered participatory?
3. Are networks associated with an identifiable community, and if so, how are such communities characterised?
4. How do the criticisms of participatory approaches relate to the participatory elements of networks?

## ***Networks as a means of development***

This section explores the participatory dimensions of networks, and, in particular, of the Networked Learning Communities that are the practical focus for this thesis. This is achieved in three stages. First, some differing applications of the concept of networks in research and practice are identified. Secondly the nature of networks and their application in educational settings are explored in more detail. The section concludes with an exploration of the literature and research around the Networked Learning Communities, in particular with a discussion of the participatory aspects of this programme.

### **Studies of networks and networking**

Networks are represented in a number of different ways, but at their heart is always a consideration of the nature, and complexity, of social interaction. Three differing perspectives on networks are emphasised in this introduction:

- The study of patterns of relationships in society, termed social networks.
- The examination of networks related to computer technology and the World Wide Web.
- The use of networks as a form of intervention to achieve change.

Although adopting slightly different perspectives, these concepts overlap in the way that they describe the nature of networks. For example, the relationships between individuals established through the internet provides one avenue for the development of social networks, and one medium through which one can intentionally bring together groups of people with similar interests in order to achieve change. The differing perspectives of these themes are outlined below.

#### ***Studies of social networks***

The term *social network* can be used to describe an approach to exploring the complex interactions, the relationships, of individuals in communities. In this context the ‘term network is used to describe the observable pattern of social relationships among individual units of analysis’ (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2000: 239). The

analysis which underpins this approach to researching social interactions often produces ‘maps’ of networks with points representing individual units of networks (often individual people), and lines indicating the complex interactions between these units.

These units and the interactions which tie them together in social networks have been termed nodes, streams and ties (Otte & Rousseau, 2002). Their use can vary in scale from localised studies, concerning the social networks of a single apartment block, to patterns of international relationships, for example the trading interactions between the economies of entire countries (Kadushin, 2002). In this respect networks are seen as an approach to research, i.e. a methodological approach, and as a metaphor for social interactions (Clyde Mitchell, 1969a).

### ***The network society***

Whilst the study of social networks has a long history in social science research (see for example: Barnes, 1954) a more recent development is of the network society. This phrase is used to describe the nature of particular societies whose systems of social interaction have become dependent on recent developments in communication technology:

A network society is a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies. (Castells, 2004: 3)

There are direct relationships between this concept and the study of social networks, indeed Castells goes on to state that a ‘network is a set of interconnected nodes’ (ibid), in doing so making a direct reference to the studies of social networks outlined above. What makes this perspective distinctive is its emphasis on recent technologies as the means by which individuals communicate and establish social networks. Thus, whilst related to the social networks outlined above, it is the rise of electronic communications, and particularly the internet, that has most contributed to the development of a society in which communication and information flows electronically and establishes remote networks of contacts between people.

### ***Strategic network development***

The final use of the concept of network to be introduced here refers to the use of networks as strategies to achieve change (Mintrom & Vergari, 1998). This differs from the first two uses of the term network, as it is concerned with networks being created in order to achieve particular aims, rather than referring to studying existing networks, whether they be the patterns of human relations (as in social network analysis) or networks of electronic communications (as in the network society). This includes the creation of institutional networks, such as those in the Networked Learning Communities, a definition of which has been provided by O'Toole:

Networks are emergent phenomena that occur when organizations or individuals begin to embrace a collaborative process, engage in joint decision making and begin to act as a coherent entity. When this occurs, a network has emerged. (O'Toole, 1997: 443)

Networking studies in education have included all three of the forms described above, including studying networks of social interactions in educational settings (Hite, Williams, & Baugh, 2005) and studying the educational implications of the network society (Stoera & Magalhães, 2004). But it is the last of the differing perspectives on networks, concerned with the intentional formation of networks to achieve particular purposes, which is most relevant to this study of networks from the Networked Learning Communities Programme. The following section explores the use of this view of networks in education.

### **Networks in education**

This section is especially concerned with the use of networks as development strategies in education. This is structured around four topics as follows:

- An exploration of the nature and application of networks in educational settings.
- A description of the perceived benefits of education networks.
- Problems and challenges associated with educational networks.
- A commentary on the relationship between educational networks and participatory intervention.

The first of these topics to be discussed is on the nature of educational networks and how they have been applied in educational settings.

### *The nature and application of networks in education*

The use of networks as mechanisms for supporting professional development and institutional change in education seems common. For example, in the USA, a survey of 5253 teachers identified networking as an area of particular interest. 62% of participants reported that they had been engaged in networking with other teachers from outside their own school, and 69% had collaborated with colleagues from within their own institution (Parsad, Lewis, Farris, & Greene, 2001: 7). Both were regarded as being activities which enhanced their teaching (Parsad et al., 2001: 9). Thus, in the USA at least, many teachers seem to engage with some form of networking, which they claim has had a positive effect on their practice.

This interest in networking has also been apparent in a variety of initiatives in the UK including: beacon school programmes, where high achieving schools are encouraged to collaborate with less well achieving schools (Burton & Brundrett, 2000), through the creation of specialist schools, with expectations to collaborate with other schools (Gorard & Taylor, 2001), and through the creation of federations of schools, in which separate schools are brought together under the same governing body (DfES, 2003). These initiatives have been complemented with a similar emphasis on more individual collaboration, such as through the work of Advanced Skills Teachers (Coldron & Smith, 1999) and initiatives that especially promote practitioner enquiry, such as the collaboration encouraged in creative partnerships (Wolf, 2008), the best practice research scholarships (Furlong & Salisbury, 2005) and sabbaticals for teachers in schools facing challenging circumstances.

The perceived positive influence that networking has on practice has led some to suggest that the formation and application of networks could even be regarded as an emerging form of school improvement strategy, especially when seen in conjunction with regional systematic efforts at achieving change:

We would argue that a fifth phase of school improvement is emerging that is largely concerned with system-level changes through collaboration and networking across schools and systems... [we] suggest that networking may have its strongest impact if there is a close interface between networked learning communities and... systematic change efforts, especially at the local authority or school district level. (Harris & Chrispeels, 2006: 302)

This positive perception of the potential of educational networks has received some attention from government departments. The Networked Learning Communities can be seen as one example, and, following the end of the NLC programme, the creation of Primary Strategy Networks as another. This interest stems from a range of perceived benefits, which are explored below.

### ***The perceived benefits of education networks***

Some of the benefits of networks have been outlined by Lieberman and Grolnick (1996) who, following a study of sixteen networks in the USA, identified six characteristics (and potential benefits) of networks, as follows:

- Networks provide opportunities for practitioners to articulate and share tacit knowledge of their work.
- Networks are flexible, they allow structures to change and develop according to the purposes of participants. This is contrasted against inflexible bureaucratic systems.
- Networks are concerned with practitioner inquiry. This emphasises participation and ‘gives voice to those who have usually been the recipients of the agendas of others’.
- Networks expand informal and formal leadership roles, providing greater opportunities for participants to engage in a wider range of leadership activities.
- Networks are believed to support the development of professional communities and challenge existing school structures which tend to encourage separation of staff.
- Networks change the ways in which practitioners work together, encouraging greater collaboration over new developments.

(Adapted from Lieberman and Grolnick 1996: 39-42).

Networks are, therefore, believed to offer a number of potential benefits which range from the individual: encouraging more active role of participants in developing their working contexts, to collective: encouraging the development of professional communities and providing a flexible system able to respond to rapidly changing contexts, and which have been identified as having distinct benefits for pupils, teachers, schools and local communities (Hadfield & Chapman, 2009).

The examination of practice by members of such networks has also been explored by Little (1993) in a study of three networks. In this research, participants were believed to have engaged in the construction (as opposed to consumption) of teaching knowledge, with networks described as both systems for the transfer of information and for the creation of new knowledge (Little, 1993). Together these are believed, by Huberman, to encourage an examination of educational practices, which, in turn, leads to more informed educational practices.

It combines community of effort with a greater certainty of practice and a more solid sense of teaching efficiency, often in the sense of having learned to listen and minister to pupils in more differentiated, challenging ways. It respects a more particularistic vision of the teaching career, what we have... called the 'artisan model'. (Huberman, 1995: 207)

Such is the interest in networks that policy makers have been convinced of their worth, describing networks as future strategies for educational reform:

The next phase of educational reform will need new methods of delivering excellence and equity in a system which responds to the diverse needs of individual learners and gives schools autonomy to create local solutions... School-to-school networks which are focused on learning offer a foundation for genuine transformation based on the knowledge embedded in teaching practice. (DfES, 2004: 2)

This suggests that networks provide a method for mediating between national expectations and the demands of local contexts. It implies that networks can be a way of utilising the knowledge that people working in those contexts have of the requirements of practice, i.e. “involving teachers as primary actors in their own development” (Lieberman & Wood, 2003: 4). This suggests that networks encourage change to be made based around the understanding and practices of individuals within those systems, an approach which has been described as being bottom up (Veugelers, 2004) as outlined by Pennell and Firestone below:

The movement organisations discussed here are more “bottom up” in the sense that they are attempting to change schools by changing teachers’ thinking, instructional practices and professional roles, but also working at other levels to provide a complementary context of policy documents assessments, texts and instructional materials. (Pennell & Firestone, 1996: 48-49)

By promoting participation and establishing inquiry practices based around communication networks are perceived to be inclusive, providing opportunities for the full diversity of staff, with their differing levels of experience and interests, to collaborate in and ultimately to lead developments in practice. This development of practice, in the study of the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), is linked to productive dialogue which results from the development activity of the network and which is seen as a mechanism for enhancing the quality of education.

The network is a vehicle for reconsideration of practice from many vantage points centering around a hub of common values supporting learner-centered practice. This makes connections between like-minded practitioners both possible and mutually profitable.... it expands the possibilities for the kinds of conversations that practitioners need to have if teaching, assessment and school structure are to be organized for student success, and if we are to assure all children an education characterised by excellence and quality. (Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Falk, 1995: 268)

The bottom up, participant led, nature of these networks has also been contrasted against what are believed to be previously unsuccessful national proscription (Lieberman & Wood, 2002). This relates to the perceived uniform, inflexible approach of bureaucracies, and the ability of networks to be able to cope with a range of different contexts and experiences.

Teachers are “developed” by outside “experts,” rather than participating in their own development. Unrelated to classroom contexts and teaching practice, bureaucracies tend to create “one size fits all” solutions that often fail to make distinctions among different kinds of school and classroom contexts, or between the needs of novice and experienced teachers. Although bureaucracies work because they can process large numbers of people, they have difficulty responding to changing conditions and the discrete needs of schools, teachers, and students. (Lieberman, 2000: 221)

The flexible quality of networks is believed to be derived from relationships between network participants, in which dialogue plays a crucial part (Kärkkäinen, 2000). Informal relationships, described as being ‘weak ties’, are believed to gain benefits from establishing direct contact between participants, but without the restrictions of formal relationships, in doing so retaining flexibility to be able to cope with diversity whilst stimulating innovation (Granovetter, 1973). In fact, Lieberman found that the desire to work together, in this way, acts as a sufficient stimulus to initiate many



networks, and the focus, in some cases, followed, rather than preceded, this collaborative commitment (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996).

The relationships that are at the heart of these networks are based around encouraging dialogue amongst participants, in doing so acting as a stimulus for reflection on individual working and for the identification and implementation of appropriate change. Bringing together practitioners is believed to start with communication amongst participants, which acts as the foundations on which more intensive collaboration can develop. This was emphasised in a study of the Innovative Links project, an Australian schools network, which identified that maintaining networks over a period of time leads from simple sharing of perceptions or reports of developing practice to a more widespread development of practice through sustained dialogue between participants.

When networks, coalitions and partnerships last long enough, they develop into ongoing learning communities, into deeply embedded cultures that are based on mutual knowledge, learning and collaboration. This replaces transmitting knowledge from one institution to another. (Sachs, 2000: 89)

This sustained dialogue is also believed to provide opportunities for less experienced staff to learn from the experiences of their more experienced colleagues.

Networks in both states provided teachers with an occasion to meet and share approaches, materials and concerns. They gave inexperienced teachers an opportunity to learn from skilled, committed veterans and gave veterans an opportunity to share insights and pursue interests together. The networks also allowed expert teachers to contribute to the profession by actively socializing with others and taking leadership positions in the networks. (Pennell & Firestone, 1996: 66)

The socialising effects of networks are, therefore, believed to provide the opportunity for the development of differing leadership roles of participants. This has also been identified by Lieberman and Grolnick (1996) who found that the networks studied provided opportunities for participants to take on formal and informal leadership of network developments, spreading participation in both the development of practice and in the leadership of practice, in doing so encouraging a more collegial culture than possible under existing school structures.

The advocates of networks suggest that they seem to combine collective practice, with inclusive principles and a focus on the development of practice. In relation to this Hadfield and Chapman identify four features of networks, namely: structures; interactions (also referred to as processes); agency (referring to individual and collective action) and purposes (Hadfield & Chapman, 2009). The perceived benefits of networks has led them to being regarded as mechanisms for engaging with the full diversity of practitioner voice (Nathan & Myatt, 1998) from which ‘bottom up’ change can be achieved (Veugelers & Zijlstra, 2002) indeed in the eyes of some the bottom up nature of networks provides an opportunity for practitioners to direct the development of their own profession.

Networks are a... way for partners involved in education to direct the agenda of teacher professionalism. They derive great power and energy from offering members a voice in creating and sustaining a group in which their professional identity and interests are valued. Networks of activist professionals sidestep the limitations of institutional roles, hierarchies, and histories; and promote opportunities for diverse groups to work together. (Sachs, 2000: 68)

However, the claims for networks are not all positive, their introduction and operation have also been critiqued, and some of the problems and challenges of networks are explored in the following section.

### ***Problems and challenges in education networks***

The critiques highlighted here support the suggestion, made by some, that Networks are more complex than is sometimes suggested (O'Brien, Burton, Campbell, Qualter, & Varga-Atkins, 2006). In doing so, they adopt one of four different perspectives as follows:

- The claims made above do not have a sufficient grounding in rigorous research.
- Individual participation in networks is problematic, and not as equitable as intended.
- Institutional participation in networking projects is selective, can exclude poorer performing institutions, and can limit the extent of any change achieved.
- Changes resulting from networks are mainly superficial.

Criticisms made of educational networks highlight a number of problems with the claims made in the preceding section. A number of these relate to the research around

which the above claims have been made. Huberman, for example, suggests that whilst there appear to be some benefits to networking, there is insufficient rigorous research examining their operation and effects (Huberman, 1995). Eleven years later, this position was argued again by Harris and Crispeels (2006), who feel that there is a danger that the popularity of networking is leading to a rhetoric of assumed good, which has not yet been fully examined, indeed some have suggested that teachers benefit more from enquiring alone than in networks (Huberman, 1995). The tendency to treat networks as a generic form is also challenged, echoing the criticisms made of participatory interventions, which tend to treat communities as homogeneous and harmonious.

Although they are often treated as a homogeneous group by researchers, teachers (and their schemata) are not the same. Teachers vary in their beliefs about teaching and learning, their levels and kinds of experience, and their work place situations... Teacher networks have also been treated as a generic form in previous research, primarily because studies have been of single programs. (Pennell & Firestone, 1996: 47-48)

Furthermore, not all reports on educational networks are universally positive with suggestions that networks can get bogged down in bureaucracy (Schutz, 2000) and that the changes resulting from networks were superficial, characterised as being 'tinkering at the edges' (Earl, Torrance, & Sutherland, 2006: 121). Earl et al, cited above, studied the Manitoba School Improvement Partnership (MSIP) and, whilst on the whole positive about the network, they also suggest that many schools failed to involve anything but a small number of staff (Earl et al., 2006), thus limiting the extent to which networks can be considered as being bottom up.

The suggestion that networks can encourage greater collaboration between institutions is also believed to ignore some apparent contradictions between high stakes accountability established via national policy mechanisms, and the aspired collaboration between schools that is advocated by the formation of networks (Harris & Chrispeels, 2006). The argument is that the standards agenda achieved through performativity measures, such as: targets, testing and tables (Ball, 2003) lead to competition between schools. The increased attention received by poorer performing schools is believed to create a system where only higher performing institutions have the opportunity to engage in developmental work, and are able to reap the

improvements in performance which result, whilst, in what is termed an apartheid of school improvement (Hargreaves, 2004), the poorer performing schools are unable to engage in beneficial development programmes and so are unable to gain the benefits from such involvement. This has led Harris and Chrispeels (2006) to suggest that the application of school networks requires a more equitable application of this approach to school improvement which does not exclude schools deemed to be unsuccessful.

However, strategies for bringing together groups of schools who would have previously been local competitors, is itself believed to be a limitation. This concerns a tendency, identified in networks, to be mainly composed of institutions serving the same geographical area and hence, similar communities. In order to gain the greatest benefits from networks, it is suggested, participants should come from a wide range of institutions with a correspondingly wide range of interests (Smylie & Hart, 1999). Therefore, whilst networks are believed to provide a means by which locally competitive schools might engage in collaboration, in order to achieve the benefits of which they desire, it is suggested that this should extend beyond limited geographical areas. This raises further questions about the nature and extent to which education networks involve communities, local or otherwise. This is an issue related to the participatory interventions literature discussed above. This and other issues are explored below.

### ***Networks and participatory change***

This above discussion provides an outline of network literature with a particular focus on networks in education. This section provides an initial outline of the relationship between network and participatory intervention areas of literature which is further developed in the later discussion exploring the participatory aspects of the Networked Learning Communities programme.

The aspirations of educational networks have been related, by some, directly to participatory aspiration. This, as noted by Lieberman in the following quote, is related to developing relationships between participants.

Although many educational institutions are not sensitive to developing norms of participation and organizational support as necessary conditions for

learning, networks paid particular attention to these conditions by emphasizing the building of relationships through collaboration in support of work that advanced the goals of the network. (Lieberman, 2000: 223)

There are additional areas of similarity beyond the explicit participation aspiration of networks participation identified above. As noted in the preceding section, one aspect of this concerns the participation of communities and the common goal of encouraging community involvement in both the production of knowledge and in subsequent change. This establishes a contextual feature to knowledge and change which is common in both areas of literature. There are, however, differences in the nature of those communities and the nature of that involvement differs, for example the communities of education practitioners that are the intended participants in networks cannot be considered to be impoverished in the same sense that is used in participatory interventions.

But, whilst the notion of community differs, both areas refer to issues of power in supporting community change. For example networks are seen as a response to what are perceived to be overly restrictive policies, in doing so increasing the power that practitioners have over their own work and over the representation of their work. Both areas also perceive that this community development process should be supported by an external facilitator, whose role has been described as being a broker (Kubiak, 2009), in particular of information (Wohlstetter et al., 2003).

Whilst this discussion explores some of the general participatory aspects of educational networks, this thesis is concerned with one particular group of networks, those associated with the Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). These adopted a particular approach, which is discussed in more detail below.

## **The Networked Learning Communities**

The purpose of this section of the chapter is to introduce the programme on which this thesis is focussed and to explore how it relates to the aspirations, organisation and justifications for the participatory interventions explored above. The Networked Learning Communities initiative ran from 2002 to 2006 and was believed to be the

largest networking initiative in the world (NCSL, 2005c) involving over 130 networks with more than 1,500 schools, affecting approximately 25,000 staff and over 500,000 pupils (NCSL, 2005e).

The arguments used in support of the Networked Learning Communities, in common with other networking literature explored above, emphasise the benefits of networks as flexible systems. This flexibility is contrasted with the perceived failure of inflexible bureaucratic systems in being able to cope with the rapid rate of change in education.

In the past, most school systems have operated almost exclusively through individual units set within hierarchically designed structural forms – typically LEAs or School Districts. Such isolation may have been appropriate during times of stability, but during times of rapid and multiple change there is a need to ‘tighten the loose coupling’, to increase collaboration and to establish more fluid knowledge flow in order to foster responsive structures. Networks are a means of doing this. (Jackson, 2002: 1)

The Networked Learning Communities programme aspired to create new relationships between members of school communities, which crossed internal and external institutional divisions and boundaries. The communities that were intended to benefit from this programme included teachers, other staff, pupils and parents as indicated by the levels of learning which were identified as aspirations of the programme as a whole:

- Pupil learning (a pedagogical focus)
- Teacher learning (with professional learning communities as the goal)
- Leadership learning (at all levels, within and between schools)
- Organisational, or ‘within school’ learning
- School-to-school learning. (Jackson, 2002)

The final evaluation of the programme seems to suggest that the networks had been successful in the first of these levels, of pupil learning, having been associated with some gains in performance scores:

At KS4, the difference between 2003 and 2005 shows that NLC schools rose more than non-NLC schools in the percentage of pupils achieving five or more A\* to C grades. A much smaller difference was observed for the percentage of pupils achieving five or more A\* to G grades, with NLC schools showing a small rise over non-NLC schools. (Crowe, with Noden, & Stott, 2006: 2)

The programme was coordinated by the Networked Learning Group, a team established for the purpose by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). Groups of schools wishing to become networks applied to this group for funding through a process involving written applications and verbal presentations. Each network had to: involve at least six schools; identify two co-leaders; establish an HEI partner, and receive consent from the governing boards and head teachers of all participating schools. As the remit of the NCSL is limited to the English education system, almost all funded networks were solely comprised of English schools. There were some exceptions, however, and some networks did include international partners.

Successful networks received two years of funding, amounting to £50,000 per annum. A third year of funding was available based on the success of the network (Earl & Katz, 2005). During the course of their three year programme, the networks were also supported by named members of the Network Learning Group, termed network facilitators. These individuals had the role of liaising with network leaders and with other network members, providing feedback on the development of the network and on the opportunities on offer from the Networked Learning Group. These facilitators also liaised over the production of an annual report of network activity, which was part of the accountability process of these networks and which informed the final year of funding.

### ***Dimensions of the Networked Learning Communities***

The Networked Learning Group provided much more than a funding, facilitation and accountability service. They also championed particular developments and created opportunities for bringing together people from across all networks. One example of this was the Networked Learning Communities' annual conference which brought together delegates from all networks to share their progress with each other, and to attend seminars. The Networked Learning Group also championed particular approaches to change, and participated in collaborative developments such as the ESRC seminar series Engaging Critically with Pupil voice (see [www.pupil-voice.org.uk](http://www.pupil-voice.org.uk)). This was a series of seminars organised collaboratively with three

Universities (Nottingham, Manchester Metropolitan and Sussex) with other invited guests.

As a part of this programme a large number of publications, including many research and evaluation reports, were published by the NCSL. This wealth of publications was reviewed by Carter and Paterson (2006) who identified three, interlinking, features of networks from them as follows:

- Network foundations: grounding participative principles
- Network infrastructure: building a collaborative design
- Network innovation: transforming practice through innovation (Carter & Paterson, 2006: 2)

The aspiration for participative and collaborative development is a theme evident in the publications outlining the initial design of the programme (Jackson, 2006). These initial publications related the development of practices in Networked Learning Communities directly to action research (citing for example: Lewin, 1946) and to the adoption of networks as a strategy for school improvement (citing for example: Hopkins, 2002).

Three levels of network were identified in this programme, namely: within school networks, school to school networks and networks of networks (Jackson, 2002, 2006). The combination of these three levels was believed to represent a nested model of networks (Jackson, 2006: 288). Whilst all three were believed to interrelate, and so the intention was that all would benefit from the programme, the main emphasis was on school to school networks. These were believed to be the most affected by the perceived forces of separation resulting from the competitive nature of the accountability agenda:

Collaboration is a more powerful, more positive motivating force than competition. Networks are about schools working smarter together, rather than harder alone, to enhance learning at every level of the education system. Strong networks make it easier to create and share knowledge about what works in the classroom, to learn from each other's experiences, to find solutions to common problems. (NCSL, 2002: 3)



One of the strategies used to enhance the network of networks levels, was the commissioning and publication of studies on the networks that were a part of this programme. These were intended to explore the nature of networking practice across the programme and to identify any resulting effects. From this the NCSL identified four main activities which are associated with the establishment and operation of successful initiation of networks.

- Design around a compelling idea or aspirational purpose and an appropriate form and structure.
- Focus on pupil learning.
- Create new opportunities for adult learning.
- Plan and have dedicated leadership and management. (NCSL, 2005a: 2)

These activities relate directly to the levels of learning identified above, but also emphasise the perceived importance of identifying a central purpose (or compelling idea) in these networks. These activities were meant to be associated with the process of networked learning and five forms were identified by the Networked Learning Group as follows:

- Joint work groups (eg project teams or curriculum development groups).
- Collective planning (eg steering groups, professional development groups).
- Mutual problem-solving teams (eg focus group).
- Collaborative enquiry groups (eg enquiry teams).
- Shared professional development activities (eg learning forums/joint staff days). (NCSL, 2005e: 3)

The interactive nature of this view of networking is evident in each of these differing forms of networking. The intention was that individual networks would devise their own approach, relevant to their main focus for development, and would adopt differing aspects of networking as appropriate. Of most interest to this thesis is the fourth of these forms, collaborative enquiry groups. The actual nature of this enquiry, and its relationship with the Networked Learning Communities, will be explored in more detail in the following section.

### *NLCs and the nature of practitioner enquiry*

Practitioner enquiry is central to the arguments presented for the Networked Learning Communities (Jackson, 2006). This is associated with a number of differing

applications of practitioner enquiry including action research (Lewin, 1946), school improvement programmes, such as Improving the Quality of Education for All (IQEA) (Hopkins, 2002), teachers as researchers work conducted in the UK (Stenhouse, 1975) and finally arguments for teaching to become a more research based profession (Hargreaves, 1999). This aspiration for practitioner enquiry was one seemingly enacted by networks as 92% of annual reviews reported at the end of the first year of funding identified practitioner enquiry as having been a significant feature of the first year of their work (McGregor, Holmes, & Temperley, 2004).

Bearing in mind the diversity of sources used to justify the enquiry principles of the Networked Learning Communities programme it is, perhaps, unsurprising that this programme also adopted a range of enquiry approaches. One illustration of this diversity is a guide written for network members considering engaging with practitioner enquiry. The author, David Leat (2005), examined literature and revisited case studies of practitioner research. He identified five concepts of relevance to the conduct of practitioner research in Networked Learning Communities shown in Table 2.3 below:

Concept 1: Intellectual Capital	Intellectual capital is the sum of the knowledge and experience of the school's stakeholders (mainly, but not only, teachers) that can be deployed to achieve the school's or the network's goals.
Concept 2: Social Capital	Social capital is the level of trust between people (including the tendency for people to collaborate and do favours for one another) and the social networks in which people operate. This argues that a high level of social capital strengthens intellectual capital because people interact and co-operate more and, in effect, share their thinking.
Concept 3: Implicit Knowledge	Implicit knowledge is built through experience and is hard to put into words. It is usually in the form of knowing how to do things and, as it is not articulated, is difficult to share.
Concept 4: Explicit Knowledge	Explicit knowledge is often derived from more formal learning, such as reading books, attending lectures, training sessions and the internet. One of the aims of teacher research is that, through reflection and analysis, implicit knowledge can become explicit and thus shared more easily.

Concept 5: Shared Knowledge	Individual and collective knowledge are, therefore, highlighted as being different. Although it is widely held that all knowledge is uniquely constructed by the individual, nonetheless it is possible for collaborative practitioners to share a body of knowledge, and this process is eased if the knowledge is explicit.
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**Table 2.3: Concepts of relevance to the Networked Learning Communities (adapted from: Leat, 2005: 5)**

This lengthy extract does emphasise the many aspired purposes of practitioner enquiry in networks and the concepts which underpin these aspirations. This ranges from the creation of individual and collective knowledge, to the nature of staff cultures within participating organisations. However a perceived tension was highlighted between individual and, the aspiration of the Networked Learning Communities, to encourage collaborative enquiry:

Effectively, it is a group of peers facilitating learning for each other and being honest with each other about their own practice and beliefs. This requires a high level of interpersonal skill, an understanding of group processes and effective communication, as well as personal qualities including honesty, sensitivity, commitment and trust. (NCSL, 2006a: 2)

A perceived challenge for these networks, and the participants in them was, therefore, to attempt to overcome the potentially isolating effects of reflections on personal experience and practice. The aspired outcome of this collaborative enquiry was for practical solutions, an aspiration contrasted against academic research as follows:

Whilst collaborative enquiry may be technically more straightforward than traditional research, it is not simplistic nor without its own rigour. Indeed, the very fact of collaborating with colleagues brings with it a pressure for quality processes and outcomes as part of peer accountability. It brings discipline to enquiry and builds ownership for its processes and outcomes. (Ibid: 2)

This quote also emphasises the collaborative nature of enquiry and the place of peer accountability in that. As noted above, the conduct of collaborative enquiry is only one of the networking practices identified by the NCSL. However, the nature of collaborative enquiry is itself varied, as McGregor et al suggest in outlining the following potential approaches:

- Development & Enquiry (D&E) Groups
- Teacher Researchers

- Research Lesson Studies
- Networked Learning Walks:
- Pupil Voice. (McGregor et al., 2004: 10-11)

This varies from informal approaches to enquiry, such as learning walks, where staff from within networks visit each others' school to observe practices around a shared area of interest (see for example: Stoll et al., 2006), to the formal approach of the research lesson (NCSL, 2005b). This approach to practitioner enquiry has been described as follows by the NCSL:

A group of teachers who know what aspects of teaching they need to improve collaboratively – plan, teach, observe and analyse a series of lessons. They record, even video, key moments and sequences as they refine the process... All their discussion and analysis starts from how the case pupils and their groups responded and learned at each stage, compared with what was planned and expected. (NCSL, 2005b: 4)

Many Networked Learning Communities adopted the development and enquiry groups mentioned above. In one case study conducted around a subject specific network, the Networked Learning Community researchers examined the role of teacher researcher groups and made the following observations:

The teacher researcher groups have both been effective in encouraging the following:

- Enquiring rather than implementing. Teachers have valued being able to pose their own questions relevant to their own practice.
- Seeking evidence of impact. The research process has raised awareness of the need to gather different forms of evidence and to reflect more deeply about practice.
- Encouraging experimentation. Being part of the research group has given an extra stimulus to teachers to try new approaches.
- Renewing enthusiasm. Being allowed to direct their own learning, being amongst others who are also enquiring, and being given some time to think have all combined to renew teachers' enthusiasm for their work. (NCSL, 2005d: 5)

However, there is a limit to the extent to which participation in processes of change can be achieved through practitioner research in these networks, in part because not all network members are likely to become active enquirers. This emphasises the

importance for the network structure to act as a conduit for knowledge as well as a structure supporting enquiry, i.e. a structure supporting processes of knowledge generation. In reference to this management of knowledge, Hadfield emphasises the particular importance for such systems in a context where participation in enquiry is not universal:

On first reading, there are obvious areas of overlap between inquiry and knowledge management as much of the literature tends to deal with the issue of how to exchange good practice within and across teams and groups in organisations. The major learning point for those of us involved in inquiry and research is the emphasis the literature places on the transfer and utility of knowledge on a broad scale – a key issue if we recognise that inquiry is unlikely to be taken up by all staff in a school. (Hadfield, 2004: 2)

This interest in knowledge is one area of contrast between participatory interventions and networks. This, and other, comparisons are explored in the following section.

### *The participatory aspirations of the Networked Learning Communities*

Participation is described as being one of the three main themes of the Networked Learning Communities (Carter & Paterson, 2006), the others being collaboration and innovation. In addition to this explicit mention of participation, there are some similarities in the arguments used in support of participatory interventions and the Networked Learning Communities. David Jackson, one of the co-directors of the programme, emphasised the importance of networks as follows:

Networks offer the potential for flexible and adaptive patterns that enable stakeholders to make focussed and purposeful connections and to build synergies around shared priorities and common knowledge-creating activities. (Jackson, 2002: 2)

This not only emphasised the importance of knowledge production and ownership, both themes identified above in reference to participatory interventions, it also made a direct, explicit connection with the perceived benefits of educational networks in general. The Networked Learning Group from the NCSL went on to identify three fields of knowledge which could relate to the work of network participants:

- New knowledge: the new knowledge that we can create together through collaborative work.

- What is known: the knowledge from theory, research and best practice.
- What we know: the knowledge of those involved, what practitioners know. (NCSL, 2005e: 2)

Thus there are similarities between participatory interventions and Networked Learning Communities in the importance of understanding of local contexts and the part that they can play in providing a mechanism by which knowledge can be produced. The context specific aspects of these three fields of knowledge address similar themes to the arguments for community engagement and the subsequent production of knowledge in participatory interventions. This is especially evident in the final of the three fields above, the knowledge of those involved. What makes this view of knowledge different from the other networking references or the participatory interventions, is the emphasis on the use of knowledge derived from other sources, which together can contribute to the production of new knowledge. Whilst knowledge in participatory interventions is introspective, being derived from an understanding of a local context and developed through dialogue between community participants, the Networked Learning Communities balances the introspective elements of knowledge production with engagement with the views of others from outside the network community.

Participation in networks that were a part of this programme was based upon improving collaboration between education professionals (Jackson, 2002) and, in particular, of teachers. In addition to this emphasis on practitioner participation, other forms of community participation were encouraged. For example a great deal of attention was given to pupil voice initiatives, (NCSL, 2004b), whilst networks were encouraged to distinguish between engagement of internal and external communities in these networks.

For most school-based networks, the communities which are their focus are internal ones – the teachers, students and other adults who work in the schools. Some, however, are also concerned with what can be described as ‘external’ communities – made up of parents, local residents, community agencies and organisations, and local businesses. (NCSL, 2004a: 3)

Accordingly, networks were encouraged to engage with external communities as partners in the process (West-Burnham & Otero, 2004). However, the main focus of

the Networked Learning Communities was on the community of practitioners in participating schools. It was through their involvement that others would benefit, including pupils and, in some case, the wider 'external' communities associated with schools, indeed these benefits have been identified as outcomes of this programme (Jopling & Spender, 2006). This definition of community contrasts with the aspirations of participatory interventions, which emphasised a more social definition of community. Although this is a different focus, many of the aspirations relating to the knowledge of those communities (be they social or institutional) are very similar, i.e. that participants would, through their involvement, be able to reflect upon existing experiences, and develop new understanding as a result of their collaborative endeavours. There is also a similarity in the aspired outcomes of such knowledge production, namely that actions, or changes in practice, would result, and that these changes are both related to individual and collective actions. For Hadfield and Chapman (2009), this is the agency aspect of networks.

However, whilst there are similarities in aspirations, the contexts in which such work is implemented is different. In the case of participatory interventions, the aspiration is to encourage greater community involvement in the processes of knowledge production, policy making and actions in society as a whole. In Networked Learning Communities, the aspirations for the development of practitioner relevant knowledge and the production of subsequent policy, is set in the existing context of the UK education system. Whilst the intention of both is to involve communities in the construction of knowledge, and in implementation of appropriate change, the former is aspiring to achieve change across society, the latter to changes within the community of education professionals. However, they are both intended to challenge systems, which are believed to be repressive, albeit to different degrees and in different ways.

An additional common feature of both is the connection made between action and research, indeed in both cases authors make explicit mention of action research and its origins (in particular: Lewin, 1946) in providing a historical basis for their work. This reference to action research also provides a practical focus for this thesis which is especially concerned with networks, which had a particular interest in practitioner

research (and action research). The following section provides an exploration of the background of action research and its relationship with participatory interventions.



## ***Action research and participatory interventions***

This section explores the final theme of this review of literature namely of action research. Although the principal focus of this thesis is on the participatory elements of educational networks, hence the exploration of related literature earlier in this review, it is networks that are especially concerned with practitioner, or action research that are of particular interest in this thesis. The links between action research and networks are limited but some authors have used action research as a method for investigating networks of relationships in social settings (Foth, 2006; Foth & Hearn, 2007), whilst others have described networking action research as a way to counteract what is perceived as a developing individualism in society (Hadfield, 2005; Posch, 1993) by allowing people to satisfy a perceived need to interdependence through networks.

These citations create a direct link between networks and action research, but there are a number of other commonalities in the three areas of literature explored in this review. Authors exploring the nature of participatory interventions make explicit reference to action research, indeed as noted above some believe participatory interventions to be action research by definition. The Networked Learning Communities (NLC) that are the practical focus for this work are also justified, in part, in their relation with action research. As a result, whilst the action research section of the literature review is the last, and shortest, it provides a conceptual thread which links the previous two sections.

### **Introduction to action research**

The conduct of action research in education has, since some pioneering projects of the 1970s and 1980s, been applied in a variety of situations and with a range of different approaches. The Networked Learning Communities is just one example of how a practitioner enquiry approach has been developed, in this case emphasising the collaborative dimensions of enquiry through a particular focus on networking. Other recent practitioner action research programmes applied in the UK include the: General Teaching Council's Teacher Learning Academy, an initiative specifically concerned with providing professional recognition for teacher learning activities (GTC, 2006);

the Creative Partnerships programme which has provided funding for a number of action research partnerships termed Creative Action Research Awards (Craft, 2008) and the best practice research scholarships which offered up to £3000 per applicant to conduct a practice based enquiry (Campbell & Jacques, 2004), an initiative which was explicitly related to action research and to its participatory nature (Furlong & Salisbury, 2005).

These three examples are far from being an exhaustive list, but they do provide an illustration of the differing ways in which action research, or related approaches, have been introduced in educational settings. All three examples actively promote some form of practitioner participation in the process of producing and disseminating new practices and related knowledge, albeit with some differences in the ways in which this is achieved. However, they all differ from the networked learning communities in that the focus, in each, tends to be on the individual and their work.

### **The features of action research**

The origins of action research are attributed to a range of different sources (see for example: Furlong & Salisbury, 2005) but Kurt Lewin is often identified as being the pioneer of this approach (Adleman, 1993; Hopkins, 1993). An example is his work on the involvement of ethnic minorities, in which Lewin suggested that research which was concerned with practice, needed to be based around actions:

The research needed for social practice can best be characterized as research for social management or social engineering. It is a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action. Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice. (Lewin, 1946: 35)

This emphasises core features of action research namely that it is based around action in social settings and is concerned with developing practices in those settings. In this respect action research is seen as being an interventionist approach to achieving change, and one which is based around the experiences of actors in particular settings and is thus participatory in aspiration. In emphasising a focus on practices in social settings, action research is often related to perceptions of 'quality' of both the

practices in question and of the social settings for those practices. An example of this interest in quality is highlighted by Elliott who states:

Action research might be defined as the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it. (Elliott, 1991: 69)

However, this is not the meaning of the term quality in the sense that is meant when used to refer to accountability, or to what has become termed by some as being a performativity agenda (Ball, 2003; Elliott, 1996). In the sense that it is used in action research literature, quality is interpreted by action researchers in reference to their own aspirations.

Action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situation in which these practices are carried out. (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988: 5)

As well as highlighting the basis of personal experiences and aspirations this quote emphasises that action research is both reflective and collective and that it should be concerned with the rationality and justice of social situations, a theme further examined by Carr and Kemmis (1986), in which they promote a ‘critical’ form of action research concerned with enhancing social justice and actively tackling inequality. These aspirations for participation, change and improvement are meant to be achieved through a common process, the action research cycle, as outlined by Lewin as follows:

[Action research is]...composed of a circle of planning, executing, and reconnaissance or fact finding for the purpose of evaluating the results of the second step, and preparing the rational basis for planning the third step, and for perhaps modifying again the overall plan (Lewin, 1946: 38)

This cyclical nature of action research was also graphically represented by Lewin. The diagram shown in Figure 2.2 provides a more detailed indication of how this series of cycles might work, in this case with particular reference to group dynamics and action research interaction and how, as a result, a collaborative group of action researchers might operate in addressing the issue in question (Lewin, 1947).

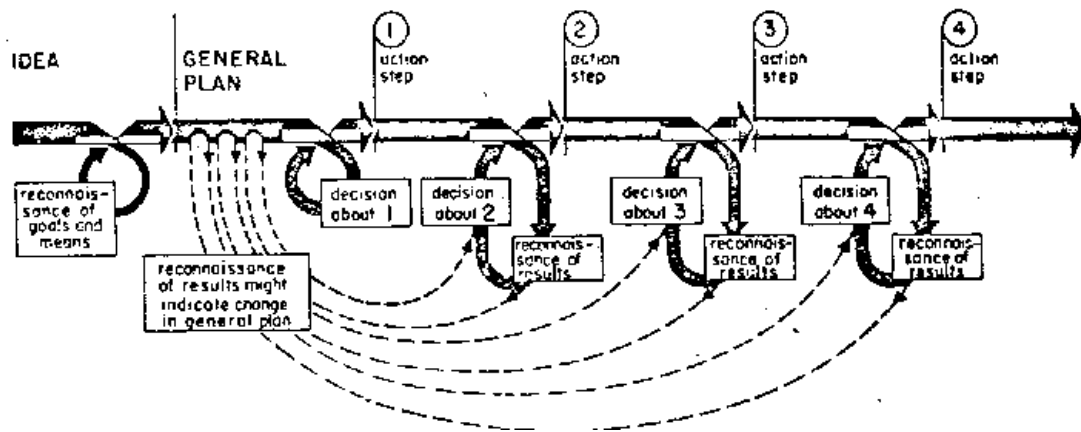


Figure 2.2: Planning, fact finding and execution in action research (Lewin, 1947: 149)

This process model is the basis upon which action research has come to be regarded, by some, as a methodology in its own right (Somekh, 2006) and a number of developments of this original have been proposed, with those suggested by Kemmis and McTaggart (1982) and Elliott (1991) being the most notable. However, just as ladders of participation are regarded as being over simplistic, so criticisms have been made of representing action research as a cycle with suggestions that they impose a series of steps, and prevent a more creative development of practices that was the original empowering aspiration of the practitioner research movement (Hopkins, 1993). The idea of a process is also challenged by some who feel that action research involves a commitment to a core set of ideals or principles, rather than a step-by-step process:

Action research is not a method or a procedure for research but a series of commitments to observe and problematise through practice a series of principles for conducting social enquiry. (McTaggart, 1996: 248).

Despite this apparently simplistic basis, of aspired change with participatory principles and a cyclical approach, the actual nature and application of action research varies a great deal in different settings as explored in the following section.

### **Differing facets of action research**

As Reason and Bradbury state, the phrase ‘action research’ has been applied to a wide range of different approaches:

The action research family includes a whole range of approaches and practices, each grounded in different traditions, in different philosophical and psychological assumptions, pursuing different political commitments. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001b: xxiv)

Attempts have been made to draw distinctions between differing forms of action research. Grundy (1987), for example, identified three forms of action research: technical, practical, and emancipatory, distinctions used by others (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) and based around differing concepts of knowledge (Habermas, 1972) whilst Holter & Schwartz-Barcott (1993) identify a typology of action research emphasising three forms:

- A technical-collaborative approach, in which an action researcher identifies a particular issue to address, with some preconceived notion of how this can be achieved.
- A mutual-collaboration approach which involves a researcher collaborating with participants to identify problems together, which are then addressed through a series of action cycles.
- The enhancement approach. This is also based upon collaboration but extends the process to develop more critical dialogue, in some senses reflecting a similar aspiration to the emancipatory approach identified by Grundy and others.

In relation to the above discussion, this section outlines three different facets of action research as follows:

- Community engagement.
- Developing practices through reflective, often collaborative, inquiry.
- Reflexivity and the understanding of the self.

These are not intended to be viewed as mutually exclusive fields of study and practice but rather these are intended to be differing facets of the same fundamental approach, which might sometimes have different emphases in the Reason and Bradbury interpretation of diversity in action research noted above.

### *Action research and community engagement*

This facet of action research is concerned with involving communities in a process of change. The theme of what has become regarded as Lewin's pioneering action research work (Adleman, 1993) was participatory in that it was an approach to change which involved the individuals who would be most affected by the change process. This emphasised group decision making and was applied in business settings and in projects concerned with resolving issues of inequality and in particular in working with marginalised or minority communities (Adleman, 1993; Lewin, 1946, 1948). This facet of action research is perhaps especially evident in community action research, an approach characterised by Stringer (1999: 9) as being 'the application of the tools of anthropology and other disciplines to the practical resolution of social problems' and as having the following qualities:

- It is democratic, enabling the participation of all people.
  - It is equitable, acknowledging people's true worth.
  - It is liberating, providing freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions.
  - It is life enhancing, enabling the expression of people's full human potential.
- (Stringer, 1999: 10)

A similar approach was adopted by Freire who advocated community participation through promoting a more equal relationship between teacher and students. This was contrasted with education practices that had been predominantly teacher centred and largely didactic (Freire, 1970). This facet of action research is concerned with involving community members in a process of change, making it, as noted above, inseparable from participatory research in the eyes of Reason and Bradbury (2001a), who go on to explain their reasoning as follows:

Action research is only possible *with, for* and *by* persons and communities, ideally involving all stakeholders both in the questioning and sensemaking that informs the research, *and* in the action which is its focus. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a: 2)

Reason and Bradbury's view is that, because action research is set within social settings, the process of action research should involve members of the communities of those social situations as befits the issues to be addressed, with the action researcher taking the role of facilitator. Collaborative inquiry, in which community members take on the role of co-researchers facilitated and supported by a researcher,

emphasises just this aspect of action research (Bray, Lee, Smith, & Yorks, 2000). This is an approach which is based around community participation, democracy and locally relevant knowledge.

Collaborative inquiry also assumes that understanding and improving the human condition requires an approach that honours a holistic perspective on what constitutes valid knowledge. Effective collaborative inquiry demystifies research and treats it as a form of learning that should be accessible by everyone interested in gaining a better understanding of his or her world. (Bray et al., 2000: 3)

In keeping with the overall aspirations of action research, the aim is not only to gain a better understanding, but also to make changes. The facilitatory role of the action researcher receives the same challenge as that posed in participatory interventions, in that rather than empowering participants it is reliant on the powerful position of the researcher (Chambers, 1983). An additional facet of action research relates to practitioners taking on the role of researcher themselves, as explored in the following section.

### ***Action research through reflective, collaborative, inquiry***

Lewin's aspirations to implement a form of research which was orientated towards action and concerned with practice are principles which have been embraced, independently, by other authors, who have themselves been attributed as being the originator of action research (Schmuck, 2006). One example is Stephen Corey who is credited with introducing action research in education (Hodgkinson, 1957) and who stated:

We are convinced that the disposition to study , as objectively as possible, the consequences of our own teaching is more likely to change and improve our practices than is reading about what someone else has discovered of his [sic] teaching. (Corey, 1953: 70)

This provides a personal focus for action research which, in educational contexts as described by Corey, is one directly concerned with the individual practices of the teacher in question. This differs from the community participation facet of action research, described in the preceding section in two ways, firstly the action researcher is the participant, rather than being a conduit for participation, and secondly the focus

for the action research is at an individual level (although, of course, it can be explored collaboratively).

This facet of action research has been promoted in the UK, through programmes such as the Humanities Curriculum Project and the Ford Teaching and Learning projects and in particular through the work of Lawrence Stenhouse, who is attributed as stating that ‘it is teachers who, in the end, will change the world of school by understanding it’ (Rudduck, 1995: 3). Stenhouse proposed a model of the extended professional which had principles of questioning and inquiry at its heart, proposing that such extended professionals would show the following characteristics:

- The commitment to systematic questioning of one’s own teaching as a basis for development;
- The commitment and the skills to study one’s own teaching;
- The concern to question and to test theory in practice by the use of those skills. (Stenhouse, 1975: 144)

In this approach practitioners are supported in systematically studying and developing their own practice, in part through an enhanced understanding of their context. Although not related to the term ‘action research’ by Stenhouse this phrase was used by others associated with these projects including John Elliott (1976), Clem Adleman (1975) and Jean Rudduck (1995). This perspective of the practitioner researcher is more than simply an ‘add on’ to practice. Indeed, there is one sense in which characteristics shown by the practitioner researcher are believed to be synonymous with being an activist professional and, hence, a more effective practitioner (Sachs, 2000).

This practice-focussed facet of action research need not be limited to the immediate context of the action researcher. Others have suggested that this approach allows action researchers to discover the ways in which practices relate, and can be distorted by, the wider social context in they are enacted (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Their proposition is that, through adopting an action research approach, individuals can examine the situations and institutions in which they practice, in order to change how these contexts are constituted and their practices implemented, so as to achieve a more rational form of communication between members of these contexts and a more just



and democratic decision making, ultimately resulting in more productive work (Carr & Kemmis, 1986).

This focus on developing practice has been applied in a variety of settings, including business (Coughlan & Coughlan, 2002; Dickens, 1999) and health care (Blackford & Street, 2000). It has also been applied widely as in education, such as through projects to engage with 'pupil voice', and in establishing pupil researcher groups (Fielding, 2004; Leitch et al., 2007; SooHoo, 1993) and in projects where groups of practitioners are brought together to work as co-researchers:

The practitioner group takes joint responsibility for the development of practice, understandings and situations, and sees these as socially-constructed in the interactive processes of educational life. (Carr & Kemmis, 1986: 203)

This emphasises a difference between this form of collaboration, where a community of action researchers work together to develop their understandings and implementation of practice through collective dialogue, and the form of collaboration through which participatory interventions or community action research is initiated, in which inquiry processes are led by an external agent. The collaborative nature of this approach is more concerned with developing practices, including through intensive dialogue between participants:

Co-operative inquiry involves two or more people researching a topic through their own experience of it, using a series of cycle in which they move between this experience and reflecting together on it. Each person is co-subject in the experience phases and co-researcher in the reflection phases (Heron, 1996: 1)

The emphasis of this approach is on the part that action can play in helping individuals understand themselves, of how they relate to their context, and of how their actions can be developed to better achieve the aims that they have for their work. This is at the heart of the final issue to be emphasised here, of reflexivity and the study of the self.

### ***Reflexivity and understanding of the self***

The third facet of action research to be explored here emphasises the interaction of an individual's preconceptions and beliefs with their interpretation of the world around

them. This is based around recognition, by some authors, that the action researcher is an actor in the social situation that is being studied. The topic which the action researcher wants to address, the change that they aspire from this process, and the judgements of quality upon which such judgements are based, will have been derived from the action researcher's own perspective. This means that the action researcher is a part of the process and so can be considered an instrument of research:

The self can be said to be a research instrument... action researchers need to be able to take into account their own subjectivity as an important component of meaning making (Somekh, 2006: 14)

A resulting consideration of action research is how it relates to the subjective position of the action researchers themselves. This is a process of 'bending back' the process of inquiry to examine its interaction with the individual action researcher, in other words it is reflexive. The term reflexivity tends to be used in three main ways (Abercrombie et al., 2000). The first of these refers to theories, theoretical positions or related disciplines which routinely challenge the fundamentals of the positions that they promote. Advocates of participatory research, as noted above, regard it as being a reflexive discipline because it is believed to continually challenge the reality of the equal contributions of participants that it endorses (Heron & Reason, 1997). A second use of reflexivity tends to be associated specifically with ethnomethodologists. This refers to the meaning that people make of the world in which they live (Pfohl, 1985), in particular emphasising that meaning is not constructed by individuals in isolation from each other, neither is it solely acquired from society, but that it involves a process in which perceptions and experiences are interpreted through individual beliefs and preconceptions, in part influenced by the society of which they are a part. Both of these forms of reflexivity have some relevance for action research. The first in that the critical process of action research could be argued to act as a disciplinary, as well as an individual, challenge to preconceptions, beliefs and aspirations. In the second case, action research is intended to be conducted in social settings, and so the construction of knowledge resulting from action research is directly related to an interaction between the action researcher and their social setting.

The third form of reflexivity is more of a personal interpretation of this concept. Used in this personal sense, reflexivity also refers to the ways in which people examine

their own beliefs, perceptions and practices, and implement change as a result (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). As with the second use of reflexivity, this approach to action research emphasises the socially situated position of the researcher although it does so more from the individual point of view than from the view of community or of society as a whole:

The self of the researcher can best be understood as intermeshed with others through webs of interpersonal and professional relationships that co-construct the researcher's identity (Somekh, 2006: 7)

Action research can be seen as a reflexive approach as it involves the action researcher in a process of developing and understanding of themselves, of how they relate to others in their immediate context, and in taking action accordingly. In relating reflexivity to recursive and dialectical dimensions of action research, Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) emphasise a perceived interplay between the cyclical, reflective process of action research, the social settings in which action research is conducted and the actions which result.

It aims to help people to investigate reality in order to change it... and to change reality in order to investigate it – in particular, by changing their practice through a spiral of critical and self-critical action and reflection, as a deliberate social process designed to help them learn more about (and theorise) their practices, their knowledge of their practices, the social structures which constrain their practices, and the social media in which their practice and expressed and realised... It is a process of learning by doing – and learning with other by changing the ways they interact in a shared world. (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998: 24)

This complicated interplay is believed to make action research a reflexive approach. This is believed, by Winter (1989), to advocate an approach which is less concerned with theory than in understanding any disjunctions between their own educational ideals and the institutionalised or accepted practices that they adopt.

What a reflexive action-research would offer... is not 'theory'... It would propose, rather, to subject the theories of common-sense and of professional expertise to a critical analysis of their located-ness within the practice whose intelligibility they serve. Action research thus proposes a move 'beyond' theories... which prescribe and justify an interpretive basis for action towards a reflexive awareness of the dialectic which can sustain their mutuality while transforming both. (Winter, 1989: 150)

The personal exploration which underpins the reflexive elements of this work has also been associated with Jacob Moreno, a contemporary of Lewin who has also been attributed as one of the founders of action research (Boog, 2003; Gunz, 1996; Moreno, 1953). Moreno was concerned with the personal focus of psychotherapy, instigating practices such as psychodrama and sociodrama (see for example: Moreno, 1953). These are seen as methods for allowing individuals to reflect upon their context, identify limiting factors from their social setting and then freeing themselves from those limitations and is reflexive in the sense that it is concerned with examining the individual's relationships with their social setting, and then embarking on a process of change as a result of the understanding gleaned from this process. A more recent application of action research in education which emphasises this form of self exploration, and which could be regarded as a particular application of the reflexive aspect of action research, is of a 'living education theory' which is grounded in the 'I' of the researcher (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006: 1). In adopting this approach, action researchers:

use a form of thinking that sees things in relation with one another. The aim of the researcher is to hold themselves accountable for their learning and their influence in the learning of others. (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006: 42)

Such an approach advocates an intensive process of self study, which takes into account not only the personal beliefs, preconceptions and aspirations of the action researcher, but also how they interact with and effect their immediate context, (in the case of teachers their school communities). This is not intended purely as a process of developing self understanding, but in keeping with the aspirations of action research, the core beliefs revealed by this process are intended to result in related change.

The three facets of action research outlined above, in some sense reflect the different scale at which action research is applied, namely the community, collaborative and individual. But whilst many action researchers would be able to relate their work to all three types of action research, those more concerned with one of the above elements would differ greatly from each other. A project concerned with community participation in the development of health care, for example, would be concerned with the development of practices, and with the subjective, and inter-subjective, positions of the members of the communities, but its application would be more concerned with

initiating dialogue between large groups of people, most notably community members and health care workers (Boutilier, Mason, & Rootman, 1997). In contrast, action research focussed specifically on the individual practices of a teacher with a small group of individuals is likely to take into account their interaction with pupils and colleagues but is principally concerned with their immediate educational practices (Holden, 1995). Whilst each is in some senses concerned with communities, practices and reflexive processes, they are different in scale, aspiration and conduct. These differences also produce differing implications for the participatory nature of action research networks, which will be discussed in the following section.

## ***Participatory interventions and action research networks: implications for this thesis***

The challenge of this chapter is to draw together three different, albeit related, areas of literature. This final section is intended to explore some of the issues emerging from this discussion in attempting to understand the participatory dimensions of action research networks. As the task is to examine the participatory aspects of these networks, this discussion is based around the themes identified from participatory intervention literature in the opening sections of this chapter. These themes are:

1. Engaging with community perspectives.
2. Ownership and construction of knowledge.
3. Action and change oriented research.
4. Moving away from a positivistic paradigm.
5. Power and control.

### **Engaging community perspectives**

All three of the areas of literature reviewed engage with community perspectives, albeit in differing ways. The review of participatory interventions suggests that such interventions are made in communities which tend to have been regarded as being impoverished in some way. This is set within a societal context and represents an overlapping area of literature with participatory action research. Networks are believed to both engage with existing, and create new, communities, although this is more often concerned with practice than cultural communities. The practice focussed and individual facets of action research make less explicit mention of engaging with communities, or of acting as representative structures, although the belief that community members are best placed to understand their context is common throughout all action research literature. Despite this common grounding in the local understanding of participants, issues could arise between the individual facets of action research (if that is how it can be characterised in these networks) and the common, shared, aspirations of the networks and participatory interventions.

## **Ownership, the construction of knowledge and action orientated research**

Initially dealt with as separate themes in the review of participatory intervention literature these two themes, of the ownership and construction of knowledge, and of action orientated research, are directly related and so are dealt with together here. The local, contextually situated ownership and construction of knowledge is emphasised, in some way, in each of these three areas of literature. Participatory interventions emphasise the importance of local understanding of issues from which knowledge can be formed. Networks are seen as mechanisms through which knowledge can be distributed, but can also be created from a net of local perspectives. The Networked Learning Communities also emphasises the importance of practitioner knowledge. In this case it is related to three fields of knowledge as follows:

- **What we know.** The knowledge of those involved. What practitioners know.
- **What is known.** The knowledge from theory, research and best practice.
- **New knowledge.** The new knowledge that we can create together through collaborative work. (NCSL, 2005e: 2)

This extract emphasises the perceptions of teachers as the principal community for participation in this programme (i.e. what we know) and the importance of collaboration (as being new knowledge). Action research emphasises locally relevant knowledge which includes knowledge of the self and, in keeping with both other areas of the literature reviewed, with knowledge which can lead to actions, or changes in practice. All three literature sources suggest that they are capable of producing new knowledge from the contextually relevant understanding of participants which, in keeping with community, and network themes, raises an additional question about the extent to which these practices are shared, or spread through these networks and how the community of network participants learn from their own and others work.

### **Moving away from a positivistic paradigm**

The epistemological question raised by participatory intervention literature is not explicitly argued in networking literature, but does relate to the contextually situated aspect of action research. However, there is an implicit interpretive dimension to all three areas of literature, in that they are all concerned with the views and

understanding of actors within particular contexts. This questions the nature of knowledge produced in action research networks, and the way that such knowledge is perceived.

## **Power and control**

The final issue concerns the influence of social setting on the actions and understanding of community members and is a recurring theme throughout all of these areas of literature. Participatory interventions explicitly intend to empower groups of individuals who are regarded as being disadvantaged. Related to this are the empowering aspirations of action research, which is regarded as being emancipatory, in that it frees individuals from societal constraints (Grundy, 1987). Networking and Networked Learning Communities literature also claims to empower practitioners to question, understand and develop practices based upon local knowledge, rather than prescribed change. This raises issues about the nature and origin of any observed change, and poses questions about how changes relate to the network and to the local context in which the change is implemented.

This discussion is intended to provide a synthesis of some of the issues that have arisen from the discussion of relevant literature in the chapter above. The methodology used to examine these, and other related issues, is explored in the following chapter.



## Chapter Three: Methodology; Researching Action Research Networks

Case studies were conducted of three action research networks that were members of the Networked Learning Communities programme. This research, and the literature review that underpins it, was guided by the following overarching research question:

**In what ways can action research networks in education be considered participatory?**

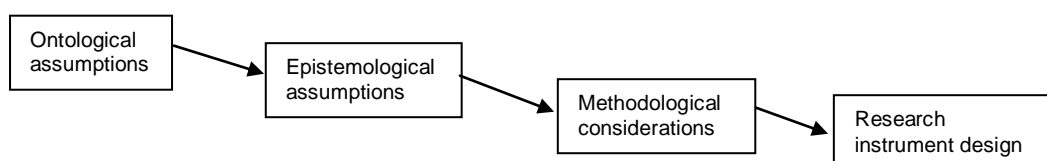
The following sub questions were also identified:

1. How do the aspirations of action research and of educational networks match those of participatory interventions?
2. In what ways are these aspirations realised in practice?
3. What part does action research play in the participatory aspects of networks?
4. How are networks organised and arranged, and how does this relate to the potential for them to be participatory?
5. How do networks relate to existing processes and structures? What are the implications for participatory aspirations of this relationship? In what ways have members engaged with the network and to what extent has this involvement been able to change the way that the network is organised and has operated?
6. In what ways has involvement in this network supported changes achieved by participants in their professional context? Is it possible to ascribe these changes to any particular features of the network?

This chapter outlines the reasoning behind selecting a case study methodology and describes the research methods used in conducting this research. The reasoning behind this is outlined in the following section.

### ***The basis and design of case studies***

To Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), the process of developing research methodology has a number of stages, as shown in Figure 3.1 below.



**Figure 3.1: Planning for research, based upon Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000: 5-8)**

This suggests that research approaches are developed from the view that the researcher holds of the object being studied (the ontological assumptions), which are interpreted through the beliefs that they hold of the nature of knowledge (the epistemological assumption). From these, methodological considerations are identified, which provide the basis for identification and design of specific methods. Using this model, the first challenge is to explore the nature of action research networks and the challenges that they offer for research.

### **Issues in researching action research networks**

This thesis is attempting to investigate the participatory nature of action research networks. The previous chapter explored three areas of literature relating to this study: networks; action research and participatory interventions. This highlighted a number of features that were distinctive and common amongst these three areas of literature. From these, four issues are identified which have informed the design of an appropriate methodology. These are outlined below:

#### ***Issue 1: Attention to local contexts***

One area of overlap between networking, action research and participatory intervention areas of literature is the importance of the local, or contextual, knowledge of participants. This implies that, in order to understand the participatory nature of these networks, they need to be examined in relation to the practices and contribution of individuals whose participation they encompass which, in turn, need to be understood in relation to the network as a contextual setting to this work. Furthermore, because of the flexibility of the Networked Learning Communities, each network adopted differing structures and processes. Thus, they are sufficiently similar to be related to each other but sufficiently different to justify individual attention.

#### ***Issue 2: Interpreting individual experience and engagement with networks***

Whilst participatory interventions are intended to operate at the community level, they are also intended to be rooted in the context of the participant and to encourage

personal involvement in the process of change. Therefore, research attempting to understand the participatory nature of networks requires a balance between examining collective aspects of networks and the individual experience of participants. In relation to this, these networks exist, and acquire their form, from the actions of the individuals who comprise them. Thus, whilst an examination of networks provides an understanding of how they operate, in order to understand how they relate to practices, the views and interpretations of individual members should be sought.

### ***Issue 3: Understanding networks in relation to each other***

The third issue concerns the desire to understand this work in relation to more general issues and to understand networks in comparison with each other. This refers to the extent to which the specific networks studied for this research enable a discussion of them in relation to each other, and to the literature discussed in the previous chapter. Whilst the sensitivity to context discussed in issues 1 and 2, involves understanding these cases in their own right, relating each case to each other, and the common issues derived from the literature review, requires shared approaches across cases.

### ***Issue 4: Understanding complex situations***

The final issue refers to the complex nature of networks. Whilst the overriding aspiration of this research is to engage with the interpretations of participants in these networks, the nature of networks, being organised systems of collaborative development, also requires a wider range of methods than the interpretive views of a limited number of participants. As well as attempting to address questions about the nature of individual experiences of networked enquiry, this thesis is also seeking to explore the operation of the networks to which individuals contribute.

The above issues provide the basis upon which the methodology for this thesis is developed. The first element of this is to explore how they relate to differing 'paradigms' of research.

## Research paradigms and the study of action research networks

The use of the term ‘paradigm’ to describe systems of interpretation has a basis in Kuhn’s analysis of science (1962), this use of the term is believed to be inappropriate outside of science (Dogan, 2001; Kuhn, 1962). As a result, the term paradigm has a slightly different meaning in social science approaches to research (Wendel, 2008) which have been associated with more individual interpretation of knowledge (Halloun, 2004; Polanyi, 1962). It is this more individual meaning of ‘paradigm’, referred to in social science (Modelski & Poznanski, 1996) and educational research (McNamara, 1979), which is used here. In this respect, paradigm refers to a “basic belief system or world view that guides the investigation” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994: 105), as exemplified by the emotionalist or constructivist approaches described by Silverman (2000), or the constructionist and objectivist approaches contrasted by Crotty (1998). In keeping with a range of authors (see for example: Cohen et al., 2000; Crotty, 1998; Pring, 2000), three particular paradigms are explored in the following sections.

### *Positivist*

The origins of positive research are attributed to Comte (Benton & Craib, 2001; Crotty, 1998) who, along with others, such as Locke, Hume and Bacon, emphasised empiricism (Pring, 2000)<sup>3</sup>. In relating this to research in social settings, Benton and Craib (2001: 23) identify the following four features:

1. The empiricist account of the natural sciences is accepted.
2. Science is valued as the highest or even the only genuine form of knowledge.
3. Scientific method, as represented by the empiricists, can and should be extended to the study of human and social life, to establish these disciplines as social sciences.
4. Once reliable social science knowledge has been established... social problems and conflicts can be identified and resolved... on the basis of expert knowledge... called social engineering.

(Benton & Craib, 2001: 23)

This suggests that there is a social reality which can be studied objectively and that the knowledge resulting from research can accumulate over time. This approach places an emphasis on objectivity with “the fundamental stance [of the researcher

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<sup>3</sup> However, there are some that dispute the extent to which these philosophers actually came from the same tradition. See for example: Hollis (1994: 42)

being that] of the unbiased outside observer” (Winter, 1989: 27). Critics of positivism argue that it has become dominant to the exclusion of other approaches (Agger, 1991) and even question whether it is at all appropriate for studying social situations:

scientific (or positivist) approaches to the study of human society are at best ill conceived, at worst irrelevant or distorting... Nothing significant in human society is given (unlike the givenness of, say, the law of gravity or the pollinating process of flowers). (Gibson, 1986: 4)

This criticism seems most appropriate to this study of action research networks. The networks in question, as noted in the four issues above, are different to each other not only in design, but in the interpretations of network members. The positivistic approach of assuming an objective position on a fixed external reality lacks the focus on individual and contextual interpretations of phenomena (i.e. networks) which, whilst similar, are not the same. An alternative is to see the social world as consisting of interacting, and yet separate, actors. This is the basis of interpretive approaches to research which are explored in the following section.

### *Interpretive*

The second of the three ‘paradigms’ to be explored here is interpretive research. This is differentiated from positivism as it rejects the notion of a single external measurable reality. Instead the interpretive view of research is that people create their own meaning in interaction with each other, and with the world around them, and so interpretive research aims to ‘understand phenomena through accessing the meanings that participants assign to them’ (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991: 5). As noted above, this study of networks is based on interpretations of networks and their application in differing contexts. This is more suited to an interpretive approach in which the focus is on the meaning that people make of particular contexts, in this case action research networks, and the experiences that have influenced that meaning.

There are, however, different views on how this appreciation of differing interpretations can be achieved. A distinction is drawn, for example, between phenomenological and ethnographic approaches to interpretive research (Pring, 2000), whilst others identify grounded theory as a distinct third approach (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Ethnographic approaches borrow heavily from anthropology (Silverman, 2000), suggesting that the nature of particular settings are best understood

from interactions between participants in those settings and studied by a researcher participating in the context in question (Verma & Mallick, 1999). This produces a detailed examination of a particular setting (see for example: Burgess, 1983), which is sometimes referred to as being a case (see for example: Ball, 1981).

Phenomenological approaches suggest that social contexts can only be understood from the collective views of the individuals involved, requiring the researcher to engage with the subjective views of individuals and to probe the interpretation they make of the setting that is the object of study. In this research, the networks are the phenomena in question, and the intention is that they should be researched through the interpretations of members of those networks. This provides some parallels to ethnographic research, in that the networks are identified as individual cases but, as they are examined through the perspectives of participants, it is more closely associated with phenomenological research. However, this is not a 'purist' application of a phenomenological method. In keeping with the view that interpretive methods are not mutually exclusive, or restrictive, this research is interpretive in aspiration and draws from a range of methods as believed appropriate (Holloway & Todres, 2003).

### ***Critical research***

The third paradigm concerns critical perspectives on research. None of these three 'paradigms' are entirely separate, and they are also not entirely homogenous. The diversity of these perspectives is perhaps most marked in 'critical' research, which is used here to group a series of critical perspectives on research. The origins of this approach to research are associated with Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy and with the Frankfurt school of Critical Theory (Tripp, 1992). This group of post-Marxist philosophers believed that, rather than promoting systems of repression, the world should be "view[ed]... in terms of its potential for being changed" (Agger, 1991: 109). This is specifically contrasted against positivistic approaches to research which are believed to contribute to the procreation of inequality (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 1999), by treating people as mere objects (Gibson, 1986).

In challenging existing assumptions about society, and the resulting repression, critical theorists, and researchers which adopt this approach, are attempting to achieve change, in doing so giving people ‘the power to control... [their] own life’ (Gibson, 1986: 5). A critical approach is, therefore, characterised by methods which are attempting to achieve political and societal change (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003). This is not the aspiration of this research but the three characteristics of critical theory emphasised here of: change, emancipation and reflection, have similarities with both action research, (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) and participatory intervention (Heron & Reason, 1997), areas of literature explored in the previous chapter.

### **The design of case studies**

The above discussion identifies some of the challenges facing this research and explores a range of research potential approaches. In some respects, these present a pragmatic view that methodological approaches should be derived from the practical considerations of the research questions, and of the context in which this research is to be conducted. In such a view, the full range of research methods are believed to provide differing (but not preferable) approaches, which are selected according to the purposes of the research (Firestone, 1990; Healy & Perry, 2000; Krauss, 2005)<sup>4</sup>.

#### ***The forms and nature of case study research***

The first two issues, of sensitivity to local context, and the interpretations of participants, suggest that these networks can best be understood through the eyes of participants and so this research has an interpretive dimension. In addition, the treatment of each network as being different, albeit related, contexts, suggests that each should be examined individually. This avoids the problems of some network studies, which are believed to assume that networks are homogenous (Pennell & Firestone, 1996). This argues for the examination of networks, using the same approaches but treated, initially, as individual ‘social units’, an approach consistent with treating each network as a separate case (Payne & Payne, 2004).

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the pragmatic view being referred to here in support of a mixed methods approach in a single study is, to some, an inaccurate view of pragmatism which, it is believed to them, advocates the co-existence of different paradigms in the same field of research, and not necessarily the same research project (Skrtic, 1990).

These case studies were intended to balance an examination of the systems and organisation of individual networks through the subjective experience of network participants. Case studies are believed to be able to bridge this gap between a detailed examination of a particular setting, and an approach which emphasises the interpretive and subjective dimensions of the networks (Cohen et al., 2000; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995; Strake, 1995). In this research, therefore, the individual unit of study, i.e. the case, is the network, which is understood through the eyes of network members, and in relationship to the wider context (Yin, 2003).

Differing forms of case studies have been identified. Strake (1995: 3) describes intrinsic, instrumental and collective case studies. The intrinsic case study is conducted when the researcher is interested in a particular situation, and not in a general problem or issue, but this can be extended through collective case studies. Instrumental case studies are defined by the selection of case study approaches as an appropriate methodology for addressing particular research questions. The approach to case studies in this thesis has elements of all three. It is intrinsic in the sense that it is action research networks that are of particular significance. They are collective (and comparative) as three cases are explored to provide some alternative forms for comparison, and for a wider exploration of issues raised, and it is instrumental in that case study is believed to represent the most appropriate methodological approach for examining these networks.

Yin (2003) identifies case studies as having explanatory, exploratory, illustrative and evaluative dimensions. This research, again, relates to each of these dimensions in that it explores three networks, with the intention of understanding and illustrating their participatory nature. These case studies, therefore, are intended to illuminate the features of individual networks, whilst providing the opportunity for contrasting networks against each other and against participatory interventions.



### *Mixing methods to study complex contexts*

The final issue to be addressed, in outlining an appropriate strategy for research, concerns the complex contexts of the networks in question. Whilst case study research is believed to be appropriate because of its attention to the particular nature of individual cases, and its interpretive aspirations, these networks are complex and are believed to be best studied using a mixture of methods. This brings together qualitative and quantitative styles of research, which are sometimes regarded as mutually exclusive paradigms (Morgan, 2007) as they are believed to have been derived from differing epistemological (Krauss, 2005) and methodological backgrounds (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). However, these differences are believed, by others, to be simplistic (Shenton & Dixon, 2004) or based on a false dualism (Pring, 2000). The differing aspects of each are clarified by Brady and Collier (2004), who identify four facets of difference:

1. Level of measurement. Qualitative data is concerned with nominal, whilst quantitative is based around ordinal and higher.
2. Size of the N. Quantitative research is concerned with larger sample sizes than qualitative research.
3. Statistical tests. An approach is considered quantitative if it adopts statistical methods to analyse data (including in attempting to ascertain validity), whilst qualitative data analysis is more concerned with a verbal style of analysis.
4. Thick verses thin analysis. Qualitative researchers are more inclined towards thick analysis that relies on a detailed description of a particular case.

(Based upon Brady & Collier, 2004: 301-302)

An alternative to perceiving qualitative and quantitative research as a dualism, or as separate paradigms, is to consider mixing the two approaches, thus making an attribute of the differences described above. Case studies are believed to be characterised more by the scope and dimension of the study than they are by particular commonly applied methods (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). Even though they have tended to be associated with principally qualitative methods, the adoption of case study as an overarching approach is not believed to limit researchers to

qualitative approaches (Bryman, 2004; Payne & Payne, 2004). Whilst some people distinguish between quantitative and qualitative forms of case study (Bryman, 2004), the examination of the networks in this study was approached using mixed methods, to identify what Robson (1993) refers to as multiple sources of evidence. This was based around combining forms of data to provide a more complex picture of the context under study. Tarrow (2004) identifies six ways of achieving combinations, as shown in Table 3.1 below:

Tool	Contribution to bridging the divide
Process tracking	Qualitative analyses focussed on processes of change within cases may uncover the causal mechanisms that underlie quantitative findings.
Focus on tipping points	Qualitative analysis can explain turning points in quantitative time series and changes over time in causal patterns established with quantitative data.
Typicality of qualitative interfaces established by quantitative comparison	Close qualitative analysis of a given set of cases provides leverage for causal inference, and quantitative analysis then serves to establish the representativeness of these cases.
Quantitative data as point of departure for qualitative research	A quantitative data set serves as the starting point for framing a study that is primarily qualitative.
Sequencing of qualitative and quantitative data	Across multiple research projects in a given literature, researchers move between qualitative and quantitative analysis, retesting and expanding on previous findings.
Triangulation	Within a single research project, the combination of qualitative and quantitative data increase inferential leverage.

**Table 3.1: Tools for bridging the qualitative - quantitative divide (Tarrow, 2004: 174)**

Of these tools, it is the final one which is most relevant here. It is argued that the differing features of networks are most appropriately examined through a range of approaches, each of which explores a different feature, or quality, of the network, and which, when combined provide a more complex picture of that network. The specific methods used to study networks are outlined later in this chapter, but first the approaches to selecting cases are outlined in the following section.

### **Selecting cases and negotiating participation**

The identification of ‘cases’, i.e. the particular instances for examination through case study, is akin to the identification of an appropriate sample in other approaches to research. However, the use of probability ‘sampling logic’ is believed to be

inappropriate as case studies do not make the same claims to generalisability implied by these forms of sampling, but rather are intended to examine particular examples of social phenomena (Yin, 2003). Therefore, cases are 'selected' because of their distinctiveness in matching the interests of the researcher (Merriam, 1998; Strake, 1995).

This is related to purposive, i.e. non-probability, sampling (Kemper, Stringfield, & Teddlie, 2003), in which the interests of the researcher guide the selection of cases. The focus of this thesis is on action research networks that were members of the Networked Learning Communities programme. This substantial programme (at the time regarded as being the largest networking programme in the world: NCSL, 2005c, 2005e) provided an opportunity to study a group of educational networks, which shared the same funding basis and the same sets of expectations. Basing this research around a large networking programme, and studying more than a single network within that programme, was intended to enable this research to extend beyond the criticism of networking studies that they tend to be limited studies based on single cases of networks (Huberman, 1995; Pennell & Firestone, 1996).

The selection of networks was managed through a database. This was developed using documents relating to the operation of networks which were part of the Networked Learning Communities (NLC). In order to assist the collaborative aspirations of the NLC programme, the NCSL established a website to host documents about the programme as a whole and about member networks<sup>5</sup>. This included summaries of networks that were a part of the programme plus a range of materials drawn from participating networks. Together, these allowed the aims, location and membership of each network to be established. In addition, the NLC programme required networks to make an application for funding and to keep a record of their work. These documents were, in some cases, made public by networks but the Networked Learning Group at the NCSL also assisted this research by providing access to these and other materials (mainly achieved through the online portal termed LEO, the 'Learning Exchange Online'). The network database designed to assist this

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<sup>5</sup> N.B. this website is no longer available but it was hosted on the National College for School Leadership WebPages

sample selection had three main areas of information recorded for each network (see appendix 1). They were:

1. Network details. This included information on the name, school membership, leadership and contact details of the network in question.
2. Nature of inquiry. This was the section of the data base which outlined the action research (here termed inquiry) aspirations of the network and which enabled initial judgements to be made about the suitability of the network for this inclusion in this research.
3. Research tracking. This final section logged the status of the network in question to the progress of this research. This included identifying whether the network had been approached to take part in the research and a log of any communications.

Having entered the basic details of all members, including the network codes assigned by the NCSL, the aspirations and activity of these networks were then examined, in particular through network proposals and activity records (documents recording the activities of networks). This was achieved by classifying the action research activity of each network. The classification system identified networks as belonging to one of four types as outlined below.

- **Type 0:** no reference to inquiry.
- **Type 1:** Identified action research/inquiry as a key element on at least one activity.
- **Type 2:** Identified action research/inquiry as an activity in its own right.
- **Type 3:** Identified action research/inquiry as the key focus for the network.

The intention was to try to identify networks in which action research was a central priority and hence were classified as either type 2 or 3. Having classified 124 networks according to their action research work, eighteen were identified as being either type 2 or 3. In addition to providing support for this research, the Networked Learning Group at the NCSL also suggested that this research be conducted in conjunction with similar research underway at another university and, of the 18 networks identified, six were already involved this university study. Of these six networks, two were able to take part in this doctoral study. The remaining twelve networks were then contacted, of these two declined to take part, five did not respond and three more initially responded enthusiastically but then withdrew. Of the two which agreed to participate, only one sustained contact as a part of the project, providing the opportunity for three case studies in total.

The second feature of sample selection refers to the selection within cases (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). In this regard, network co-leaders had the role of gatekeepers (see for example: Tushman & Katz, 1980) and were able to give consent to further contacts being made with potential individual participants in the network. Having gained agreement of the co-leaders to request participation of their colleagues in this research, further contact was established with each network as was thought appropriate by those co-leaders<sup>6</sup>. This involved providing further information about the conduct of the research, both in person at meetings, and in providing documents introducing the research (see appendix 5). The intention of the second stage of sampling was to identify network members who had been involved in the action research features of the network. These potential participants, through mechanisms agreed with network co-leaders and outlined in further detail in the case study chapters, were then approached to take part in the completion of the questionnaire, which in turn included instructions for participants wishing to volunteer to take part in the interview stage of research (see appendix 2). This was not the only means by which participation in interviews was negotiated. There were also further meetings, as requested by co-leaders, to explain the purpose, process and ethical aspects of research (see later ethics section). As each network was distinctive, they were considered separate cases, and so the actual number of participants in the interviews and questionnaires varied between networks. Further details of the actual numbers of participants are provided in each of the case study chapters, whilst the overview of each of the three research methods is provided in the following section.

## **Research methods for studying ‘cases’**

This section explores the methods used to collect data from which these cases could be understood. As identified above, these methods are selected to provide different forms of data which were intended to enable the examination of networks in a range of ways, an approach intended to take account of their complexity. Three methods were used to collect data as follows:

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<sup>6</sup> Each of the networks identified different requirements in the contact with participants and more details on this is provided in the introduction to each of the network case study reports, detailed in chapters four to six.

- Documents relating to the operation and accountability of the networks in question. Each network submitted a range of documents to the Networked Learning Group at the National College for School Leadership. This included the initial bid, which outlined the aspirations of the network, an annual review, and a concluding evaluation. These provided a source of evidence, which illustrated the aspirations of the networks, their development and their perceived effects. These documents had a dual function in informing the selection of appropriate networks.
- The second source of data provided an examination of the membership, scope and operation of the network through the completion of questionnaires. These questionnaires provided the opportunity to explore a number of set themes across these networks, involving greater numbers of participants than was achievable in the in-depth interviews.
- The third source of data was a series of interviews conducted with action researchers in these networks. These were intended to provide the participants' perspective on the networks of which they were a part, and of the place of action research within them on the participatory aspects of this work.

These differing methods were intended to provide a more complete picture of the individual cases by providing access to data of different forms, from different sources and collected with differing degrees of researcher control (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). The design and development of these research approaches (including piloting) are outlined in the following sections.

### *Documentary analysis*

The operation of these networks resulted in the production of a wide range of different documents from minutes of meetings to reports from action researchers. These included a series of standardised documents, produced by each network to report to the NCSL, and from which the aspirations and perceived progress of each network could be established. The specific documents used in the documentary analysis are:

- A network bid. Networks were selected through a multi stage bidding process, the first stage of which was to produce a bid which outlined:
  - The network organisation, including the names of member organisations, co-leaders and critical friends.
  - The aims of the network and the strategies that they would use to achieve them.
  - The aspired outcomes of the network, including identifying the effect of the network at the ‘levels of learning’ mentioned above.
- A review of activity after one year. This was written on a pro-forma provided by the Networked Learning Group, which required each network to report activity in year 1, priorities for year 2, and next steps for year 2, against the levels noted above.
- A review of activity after two years of operation. This review, whilst covering similar areas to the year one review, has an extra benefit for networks as this was the mechanism by which the Networked Learning Group decided which networks would receive funding for the third year of operation.

However, whilst these documents do articulate the aspirations of networks, and are a record of activity, they have been written in relation to accounting for funding. This suggests that these documents not should be seen simply as representative of social context (Cortazzi, 2002), but should be seen in relation to the context for their production (Jupp & Norris, 1993), in this case as reports for a funding body.

In analysing documents, distinctions are drawn between primary and secondary sources (McCulloch & Richardson, 2000). Primary sources are documents produced in the setting being studied for purposes other than the research being conducted, whilst secondary sources are those produced as the result of research. The sources used for this thesis are mainly primary sources, inasmuch as they have been produced by the participants in the contexts being studied. As they have been produced for purposes other than the research, however, they can only provide an incomplete picture of the case being studied. As a result, the sources identified above can provide a guide to the aspirations of these networks, and to the work that they wish to persuade their funders they have done, but one which can only provide a contribution

to understanding the participatory elements of their work. For this reason, these documents are used, in the following chapters, to provide the context to each of the cases, in particular to identify, at the start of the chapter, the following aspects of the network in question:

- The number and age range of member schools.
- The enquiry aspirations of the network.
- The work that the network has done over the first two years of funding.

This provides a framework from which the work of the network can be more fully understood through the more interventionist research methods, namely the interviews and questionnaires, the design of which are outlined below.

### *Questionnaires*

Whilst this case study research had overarching interpretive aspirations, this research also adopted a pragmatic, mixed methods approach to case study (Morgan, 2007). The documentary analysis provided an opportunity to examine the reported aspirations and activities of the network, and interviews gave participants a chance to articulate their view of the network, while questionnaires provided the chance to gather data on the same issues from a wider number of participants across the networks. The questionnaire used with participants is shown in appendix 2<sup>7</sup>. The first page of this questionnaire was devoted to explaining the purpose of this research and the role that the participant had in completing the questionnaire. This was intended to ensure that individuals choosing to complete the questionnaire were giving their informed consent (see ethics section below) and that, if they chose to, they could volunteer for the interview aspects of the research. The actual design of the questionnaire was split into sections according to the nature of the questions being asked.

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<sup>7</sup> As this research was conducted in conjunction with a project underway at another university, two versions of this questionnaire were used. The extract shown is from the questionnaire used with Network 1, the network that was not a part of the research conducted with this other university. These questionnaires were the same other than for a final, attitudinal scale, section in the university questionnaire which has not been used in this research.



Section 1 asked participants to record a number of aspects about them and their role. The first group of questions were intended to establish participant profiles. The aspiration of these questions was, where possible, to collect data as whole numbers, i.e. at the ratio or interval level of measurement (Aldridge & Levine, 2001; Field, 2000), rather than grouping data, i.e. at the ordinal scale of measurement (Aldridge & Levine, 2001; Field, 2000), as this provides a more robust basis for further analysis and with more sophisticated analytic potential (Cramer, 2003). Therefore, when asking for age, experience and years worked in their current school, whole numbers were requested.

The second part of this profiling section was then intended to identify the nature of participants' organisation and their role and responsibilities in their school. This provided participants with multiple choice lists. Each potential response was coded as individual items, rather than one item for the question as a whole. Whilst technically being at the nominal level of measurement, the identification of each possible answer as a separate item, i.e. as binary data, also provided the basis for more sophisticated analysis (Blaikie, 2003).

Following the questions from which participant and network profiles could be drawn, the participant was then asked to record responses relating specifically to the action research aspects of their work. These questions adopted two forms, one of which was the same multiple choice, nominal scale, type questions described above. In addition to this form of question, participants were asked about their motivations for becoming involved in networked action research. These questions were multiple choice in that participants were given a list of responses from which to choose, but they also adopted a rating scale (Aldridge & Levine, 2001) giving participants the chance to identify the relative importance of the different reasons for participation.

Having examined the focus, nature, and motivations for engaging with, networked action research, participants were then asked about who they had worked with, or been supported by, during their action research. These questions provided an

indication of who had been involved in networked action research, why they had become involved, how they had worked, and with whom.

This questionnaire, along with the documentary analysis was believed to provide an overview of each of the networks. However, in order to realise the interpretive aspects of the aspirations of this thesis, participants were given the opportunity to explore these issues in more depth and with more freedom to define the issues being explored and, it was with this intention, that interviews were also adopted. This is outlined in the following section.

### ***Interviews***

The final research method used to study cases was interviewing. The two methods discussed above, of documentary analysis and questionnaires, were believed to provide data on the aspirations and management of the network as a whole, and on the range of motivations of participants in the action research features of the network specifically. However, neither of these were believed to provide sufficient opportunities for participants to explore the issues around their own involvement in networked action research and its relationship with practice. Interviews were adopted, therefore, in order to provide a more detailed and personal form of data collection, indeed to develop an *inter-view*, i.e. an exchange of views (Kvale, 1996), between the researcher and participant about the participatory nature of networked action research. As these interviews were believed to be the aspects of the research over which participants have most control, they were perceived as representing the main interpretive elements of this research and so, in the presentation of case studies in chapters four to six, more prominence is given to the interviews than to documentary analysis and questionnaire data.

Forms of interviews are commonly related to the level of structure applied by the researcher, with a continuum being described from unstructured to fully structured interviews (Burns, 2000; Campbell, McNamara, & Gilroy, 2004; Robson, 1993). Fully structured interviews are seen as providing a similar form of research, and eliciting a similar type of data, as questionnaire surveys, albeit with opportunities for

more detailed explanation of questions (Burns, 2000). In contrast, unstructured interviews are intended to be akin to participating in more natural conversations, an approach regarded as more qualitative than structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). This form of interview is intended to explore the ways that participants view themselves and their wider social setting (Van Manen, 1990). Specifically, the desire in this research was to explore what participants had been engaged with as a part of their action research, why they had become involved, and how this had related to their practice. These issues are more suited to the qualitative interview as the participant is interpreting, with the researcher, their own experience. This approach to interviewing is described by Rubin and Rubin (1995: 6) as having the following features:

1. Qualitative interviews are modifications or extensions of ordinary conversations but with important distinctions.
2. Qualitative interviewers are more interested in the understanding, knowledge and insights of the interviewee than in categorising people or events in terms of academic theories.
3. The content of the interview changes to match what the individual interviewee knows and feels.

This model of interviewing is, therefore, based around an extended conversation, and is believed to be responsive in providing the opportunity for the development of the discussions in ways that seem appropriate to each party. Therefore, rather than being an interviewer-respondent (Powney & Watts, 1987) model of interviewing, in which the interviewer poses questions and the interviewee answers them, the aspiration was to establish both parties as ‘conversational partners’ (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

In keeping with these aspirations, the original design of these interviews was closer to the unstructured end of the interview continuum, in which an initial stimulus was provided by the researcher, which would then simulate ‘narrative production’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995), i.e. lead to a detailed discussion in which both parties played an equal role. However, in response to the piloting of the interviews, this design was adjusted to a semi structured interview (Wengraf, 2001). More details of this piloting process are provided in the following section. This decision was, in part, in recognition that research interviews are not the entirely neutral processes that had been intended (Kvale, 1996).

The aspiration of these semi structured interviews was that a common set of issues would be explored, thus providing some commonality between interviews, but that they would also provide the flexibility to enable participants to have an influence over the progression of the discussion. In this approach, interviews are based around a schedule or agenda (see appendix 3), but rather than being rigidly imposed (as in structured interviews), the agenda or schedule acts as a series of prompts for the interviewer to refer to if they have not been covered as a part of the developing discussion (Tomlinson, 1989). The intentions of these interviews were designed to start with accounts of the participant's involvement in networks being initiated with the question: 'could you please explain how you first became involved with your network'<sup>8</sup>, from which a conversation would develop.

These interviews were arranged in consultation with individual participants and were organised in locations of the participant's choice, often in their school, and at a time of their convenience. Before the start of each interview, the aspirations and the ethical requirements of the research were outlined for the participant. This was done through two documents, the first providing an outline of the project and its aims (see appendix 5), the other outlining the nature of the consent participants were giving for the research to take place (see appendix 6). Following the agreement to participate, interviewees were then asked for permission to record discussions using digital recorder. From these recordings, interviews transcripts were produced. These transcripts were records of the content of speech, rather than the pattern of speech as would be the case for conversation analysis (Heritage, 1997). A part<sup>9</sup> of one interview transcript is included as appendix 4. A total of 24 interviews were conducted across the three case studies and further details on the specific interviews conducted can be found in the case study chapters.

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<sup>8</sup> This was the same question used to initiate the unstructured interviews but, as noted in this section of the methodology chapter, and further explained in the section detailing instrument piloting, the semi-structured approach to interviewing adopted a series of prompts to ensure common coverage of issues.

<sup>9</sup> N.B. the regulations governing the submission of doctoral theses in Humanities and Social studies subjects, including Education, limits the total length of appendices to 5000 words and so only a brief extract of a transcript has been provided here.

## Instrument piloting

The above methods of data collection were piloted to ensure the effectiveness of their design. These were trialled with an action research network in an inner city authority. This was a network whose primary purpose had been to bring together groups of practitioners as action researchers and so matched the selection criteria of the three network case studies outlined above. However, in selecting a network to pilot these instruments, it was felt that this network should not be a part of the Networked Learning Communities programme as this would have then precluded their involvement in further research. Thus, whilst the network with whom the instruments were to be piloted shared the conceptual aspirations of the networks selected for the main aspect of research, they were not a part of the population from which the final cases were to be selected.

Pilot participants were first asked to review the documentation provided to potential participants to inform them of the aspirations of the research and their potential role in it. Pilot participants felt that this documentation was sufficient, indeed there was a suggestion that this was better handled verbally but, in keeping with the ethical requirements of doctoral study, these documents were kept.

Participants were also asked to complete the questionnaire and to meet with the researcher to discuss its design. This meant that detailed responses could be gathered from participants about the design of the questionnaire. This feedback was noted on the questionnaire themselves and prompted further editing. In particular, the participants in this pilot made the following comments about the questionnaire design:

- Participants suggested that there should be more of a visual distinction between questions. As a result, the background to the section headings was made grey, and horizontal grey lines were adopted between questions with a lot of text.
- Participants suggested additional responses should be offered on the nature of the school and subject responsibilities; this included providing the option of 'other' with an open response option for participants.
- The general structure, of asking participants for information about themselves, and their organisation, before asking about their action research, was thought to be appropriate.
- The rating scale for question 2.1 was simplified.

- The form providing the opportunity to volunteer for the interview stage of the research was originally at the conclusion of the questionnaire. Pilot participants felt that this was better at the start of the document.
- Pilot participants suggested that 15 minutes was ample time to complete the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was revised in line with these comments. Interviews were also piloted with participants from this network. As noted above, the original approach intended for the interviews was unstructured. Five interviews were conducted with members of the network and these interviews were recorded on a digital recorder with transcripts produced from these recordings. These transcripts were then analysed to examine the comments of both ‘conversation partners’ (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), to test the extent to which this approach was deriving relevant data from participants, and to establish the role adopted by the researcher in the unstructured interview process. The comments from participants identified a number of relevant issues, whilst the study of the researcher’s role in these interviews ultimately identified seven forms of interjection from the researcher. These were: sharing the researcher’s own thoughts; summarising discussions; making suggestions; seeking clarification and probing particular themes; making supportive statements and asking questions which directed the discussion. The frequency of use of these different forms of interaction is shown in Table 3.2.

<b>Comments from researcher</b>	<b>Passages coded</b>
Support	2
Sharing	3
Suggestion	3
Probe questions	9
Summary	10
Clarification	12
Directive questions	13

**Table 3.2: distribution of coded passages in pilot interviews**

This highlights that, despite the unstructured aspirations of the researcher, there was a continuing reliance on questioning as an interview technique. Specifically, 22 passages were coded containing two forms of questioning and, of these, the most commonly used interjection was of directive questions. This raised questions about the authenticity of such unstructured interviews which have been echoed by others:

‘The agendas and assumptions of both interviewer and interviewee will inevitably impose frameworks for meaningful interaction’ (Mason, 2002: 231). Nevertheless, these interviews did provide some insights of relevance and so, in light of the outcomes of this pilot, a revised interview approach was devised. Rather than attempting to use an entirely unstructured approach, a semi-structured approach was adopted to provide a balance between addressing the issues that were of particular interest, whilst allowing for some ownership over the schedule by the research participant (Jones, 2004).

### ***Data collection***

As noted above, a part of the case selection process involved contacting network personnel identified on network documentation. This also initiated negotiation of the process of data collection with participating networks. The selection of cases also involved working in conjunction with research being conducted on the same topic with another university. Two of the three networks selected for participation in this thesis were selected from the six around which the university research was conducted, and the negotiations about participation in this doctoral research were conducted simultaneously with the university research. This meant that participants were aware of the nature of their participation and of the purposes of the data being collected.

The collection of the three forms of data noted above, of documents, questionnaires and interviews, occurred roughly in that order in each network. However, the timing of this was organised according to the preferences of the network in question and so each element of research was not conducted simultaneously in all three networks. The intention of collecting data in the order outlined above was that this contributed to a developing knowledge of the network cases. Thus, by the time the interviews were conducted, the researcher had a developing awareness of the organisation and aspiration of the networks, arising from the documents collected and questionnaires returned.

In the event, this was not as clear cut as this aspiration would suggest, as this research includes documents produced by networks after the research had started and not all questionnaires were returned prior to the inception of the interviews in each case.

However, whilst the timing of the collection of each element of data overlapped in all networks, some documents had been collected prior to the questionnaires, and some questionnaires had been completed prior to the interviews, which achieved the aims of developing a perception of the networks in question. Further details of the specific approaches to data collection are outlined in each of the case study chapters which follow this chapter.

### ***Ethical framework***

In keeping with the ethical requirements of doctoral study, this research had to be approved by the department ethics committee, which made a number of stipulations on its conduct. The first ethical consideration of this research concerns the decision for networks, and individual participants within them, to become involved with the research. The principal of informed consent requires that potential participants are provided with information about the study before they decide whether to take part, that this information is understood, and that subsequent decisions are voluntary, and not subject to pressures which might encourage participation, irrespective of their wishes (Silverman, 2000).

As noted above, the approaches for individuals to participate in this research had two stages. The first was to network coordinators and this was initiated with direct contact from the researcher. This then led to a dialogue with members of the network about decisions to participate, which involved attending network meetings and conferences to explain the purpose of the research to other network members so that an informed decision could be made. However, once a network had decided to participate as a whole, there was no obligation on individual network members to participate in either the questionnaire or interviews aspects of the research and so further negotiations were undertaken for this phase of the research. To ensure that decisions to participate were made on an informed basis, potential participants were provided with documents outlining the nature and purpose of this research. This included outlining the research, an introductory statement emphasising the aims of the research on the questionnaire, and a statement which was to be agreed by participants before interviews could be undertaken. However, because of the problematic nature



of informed consent (Ball, 1984; Burgess, 1983) the right to withdraw (Cohen et al., 2000) was also emphasised for participants. This can also be seen in the documents contained in appendices 2, 5 and 6.

In addition to the concerns for informed consent and the right to withdraw, the ethical frameworks require that research does not harm participants, that there is a positive outcome, and that the values and decisions of participants are respected (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001). In order to provide some benefit to participating networks, offers were made to them for the researcher to return to present the outcomes of this work in the form of a workshop. This was intended to provide some benefit to participants, in keeping with what is sometimes termed the ethics of reciprocity (Howe & Moses, 1999) or beneficence (Gorman, 2007). This was also, however, believed to provide a challenge to the issues of potential harm, one facet of which is to ensure the confidentiality of participants. Thus, whilst the aspiration above was to feedback to participating networks, in doing so this feedback needed to be as confidential as possible.

This principle was adhered to throughout this research and so, in case study chapters, neither networks nor individual participants are named. Furthermore, sound files from interviews are stored on a finger print protected computer and these, and the transcripts themselves, also do not identify participants, except by code (see for example the code at the start of the transcript in appendix 4). In order to address the final principle of respecting the interests of participants, their views are quoted directly in this research, thus maintaining their 'voice'. This also relates to the conduct of analysis, which is explored in the following section.

### ***Data analysis and triangulation***

This research is based around three case studies of action research networks. In keeping with the treatment of cases as the unit of analysis (Yin, 2003), issues are drawn from an analysis of each case individually (Abercrombie et al., 2000), before contrasting these with literature and with the other networks. Furthermore, the three forms of data collected: documents, questionnaire responses and interview transcripts,

each address a differing range of issues of the network in question and so are initially considered separately, with the issues from each being drawn together to provide an overview of the case study as a whole. Thus data are presented in order: documentary analysis; questionnaire data and interviews.

The documents collected from networks, and the interviews conducted with network members, were both analysed to identify issues arising in the content of text and speech, respectively, from which themes were identified. Whilst this is an approach to analysing the content of speech, it is not 'content analysis' in the quantitative sense (Silverman, 2000). This identification of themes arising from these two sources of data is essentially inductive (Payne & Payne, 2004) in keeping with approaches in interpretive research (Andrade, 2009), in that the themes identified are drawn directly from the data (Seale, 2002).

But this research also makes use of questionnaires to examine the profile of participants in the network, their motivations for participating, and the roles of others in their action research. This adds one aspect of a deductive element to this research (Bryman, 2004), in that the analysis of data is based on questions and themes predetermined in the design of the questionnaire. As the sample sizes of these questionnaires are relatively small (although the largest number of participants was over 90), descriptive analysis was felt to be most appropriate (de Vaus, 2002; Field, 2000). The only exception to this was the use of measure of central tendency and cross tabs (Blaikie, 2003), neither of which require sample sizes associated with statistical significance.

Each of the three sources of data were initially analysed separately. Having drawn issues from each of these, themes were then contrasted to identify the overarching issues drawn from each case. In fact, whilst represented as a mixed methods approach, the separate analysis of differing forms of data prior to contrasting outcomes is akin to the multi-method, or multi strategy, described by Bryman (2006). One of the challenges faced in this mixing of methods concerns how the analysis of data is combined and the extent to which one method is given precedence over another. One solution to this is to adopt a sequential approach (Morgan, 1998), which

is the approach used here. This process is intended to provide a triangulation (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007) between the outcomes of different forms of data. In this regard, the outcomes of one method are ‘tested’ against another. Whilst this triangulation does have benefits for testing the reliability of research, the mixing of methods is believed to go beyond triangulation, in which differing forms of data are used to examine the same issue, as these differing forms of data can provide data on differing aspects of the same issue or context, enriching the understanding of that issue from differing perspectives (Bryman, 2007).

Having identified issues from each case individually these are then, in the cross case analysis, contrasted against each other and against literature explored in the previous chapter. In addition to the analysis of questionnaires explored above, this reflects a second form of deductive analysis (Bryman, 2004). This combination of inductive and deductive forms of analysis establishes what is believed to be abductive approach (Morgan, 2007), an approach distinctive to pragmatic mixed method research (Andrade, 2009; Yin, 2003).

### ***Reliability and validity***

Reliability and validity have somewhat different applications in qualitative and quantitative research. As the case study approach adopted in this research was mixed methods, both need to be considered in reference to this research. The issue of reliability questions the extent to which the research methods chosen yield data consistently. In quantitative research, reliability questions the regularity with which the questions measure the same variables in the same manner (Aldridge & Levine, 2001). In more qualitative approaches to research, the issue of reliability questions the accuracy, and especially the regularity, with which the data records the observations in the social setting in question (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007: 149), in this case in the interviews.

Validity concerns a range of different issues, but all of which are concerned with the conceptual aspects of the research. In particular, this concerns the extent to which the research accurately relates to concepts or theories under study (external validity) and

the accuracy with which the theories and conclusions drawn from research are based on data collected (internal validity) (Cohen et al., 2007). However, there is a view that the use of the term validity is more associated with quantitative research, and in particular with positivism (Golafshani, 2003), and that a better approach, in qualitative research, is to think about notions of trustworthiness (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The piloting of the research methods described above provides one opportunity for testing both the reliability and validity of this research. This was achieved by giving participants the chance to comment on the methods used, and the accuracy with which the outcomes of research are presented to them. This is a form of respondent validation and provides an opportunity for participants to comment on the extent to which they could both interpret the requirements of the research instruments, and the extent to which the interpretation of the researcher accurately reflects the meaning intended by the participant (Bloor, 1997). Whilst there are suggested differences between the interpretations of validity and reliability in quantitative and qualitative research, this method provides a chance for enhancing reliability and validity in both and, as noted above, the conduct of pilots informed the design of final research instruments and the overarching approach to the case study research.

The validity and reliability of documentary analysis is believed to be enhanced through the use of primary sources (McCulloch, 2004; McCulloch & Richardson, 2000; Pierce, 2008). As noted earlier, the documents analysed in this research were all the originals produced by the networks being studied and so were all primary sources.

In addition to the benefits of piloting the research, the adoption of a mixed method approach also enables a process of triangulation which can test one of the outcomes of the research against those of the others (Golafshani, 2003). In this, the outcomes of any one method for data collection is contrasted against the outcomes of the others. This ensures that the overarching conclusions drawn from any one case study are supported by the methods by which data were collected. In keeping with this principle, the presentation of case studies is structured with each of the methods being

examined individually before the overarching issues are drawn out at the conclusion of the chapter. The adoption of this form of triangulation is one form by which validity can be examined and enhanced at the analytic stage. This involves statistical analysis of questionnaire responses to examine the regularity of responses to questionnaire items. As the data from these questionnaires were coded as binary items, the Kuder-Richardson Coefficient was used to test reliability (Cramer, 2003; Field, 2000). The response of this test provided a coefficient of 0.9306, considerably above the 0.7 threshold for reliable responses.

## ***Overview***

This chapter outlines the design of a research approach to investigating action research networks. Because of the nature of these networks, the most appropriate approach is one which recognises them as individual and distinctive phenomena, i.e. case studies, and which uses a mixture of methods to investigate these complex settings. In order to respect the individual contribution of differing methods, the chapters detailing these case studies do so by first examining the outcomes of each data collection method individually, starting with the documentary analysis, followed by an analysis of questionnaires and concluding with an analysis of interviews. The presentation of each of these individually is then used to identify issues drawn from that particular case. These three case studies, which follow this chapter, also outline the particular approaches to data collection negotiated with that particular network.

## **Chapter Four: Case Study of Network 1**

Three case studies were conducted of networks that identified action research as being a central feature of their work; each is examined in a separate chapter. These are structured around the analysis of documents, questionnaires and interviews, and the chapter concludes with a reflection on issues that this case has raised about the participatory aspects of networked action research.

### ***Introduction to Network 1***

Case study 1 is of a network comprising, at the time of their application for funding, fourteen primary schools. These schools were close together, being served by the same local authority. Prior to becoming a Networked Learning Community, Network 1 had been funded by the local authority with action research support provided by the authority in question and a local university. The background and operational features of the network are explored in the documentary analysis that follows.

### ***Documentary analysis***

The aspirations and organisation of Network 1 were examined through the analysis of four documents. These were:

1. A report of an enquiry conducted in 2003 by the Networked Learning Group at the National College for School Leadership.
2. A report of an enquiry conducted in 2004 by the Networked Learning Group at the National College for School Leadership.
3. The application for funding made by Network 1 in 2002.
4. The self assessment record reported by Network 1 to the NCSL in 2004.

The analysis of these documents is presented in two sections, the first providing an overview of the network, the second exploring the nature of action research in Network 1.

### **Overview of the network**

Two documents termed ‘spring enquiry’ are referred to here. These were annual reviews of networks conducted by NCSL personnel. The second report (2004) provided a summary of the organisation of Network 1, outlining its background as a

local authority and university managed network, and emphasising the importance of the school based action research groups (the School Improvement Groups, later referred to as School Inquiry Groups).

[Network 1] is a network of 14 primary schools... It began as a research network supported by [HEI Partner] and [Local Education Authority]... Since becoming an NLC the research and enquiry focus has continued, with School Improvement Groups (SIG) running projects linked to their own school priorities... SIG co-ordinators meet... through half-termly meetings during which researchers update network colleagues on their recent work. There has been little encouragement of cross-school enquiries either from the HEI, LEA or the NLC leadership, and participation in the NLC has not extended beyond SIG membership. Milestone conferences are designed and organised by [the] HEI partner, and are open to SIG members and senior teachers only. A recent interest in Networked Learning Walks has meant that opportunities for involvement in NLC activity have become [more widely] available. (NCSL Spring Enquiry, 2004)

This quote emphasises the network-HEI-authority partnership described above. The main shared activity of schools in Network 1 seemed to be school improvement (inquiry) groups, termed SIGs. The authors of this report, however, express doubts about how far the work of these groups extends beyond the membership of the group itself. Two further networking activities are highlighted by this report, namely the milestone conferences (although there again seems to be some concern about participation) and the adoption of the learning walks advocated by the Networked Learning Group themselves.

This document questions the extent of participation in the network, suggesting that involvement in network events was limited to senior teachers and members of development groups. The previous year's enquiry report suggests that the composition of the development groups had a different aspiration:

Due to the construction of the SIG coordinators group... individual HTs take less of a leading role in the development of the network... although [network members] recognised that it is crucial to have HTs on board in order to build leadership capacity, and [to support] groups like the SIG group. (NCSL Spring Enquiry 2003)

This suggests that the SIGs and network were intended to operate with the support of headteachers but without excessive intervention. This was further evidenced in the network activity records a (moderated) self review completed by the network as one

source of evidence against which decisions about continuing funding could be based.

This reported ten areas of activity as outlined below:

1. Developing network structures
2. Milestone Conferences
3. Inquiry methods training
4. Conducting school based inquiries
5. Integrating the work of the network with other initiatives
6. Learning walks; September 2003, ongoing
7. Headteacher inquiry
8. Pupil participation and achievement
9. Dissemination strategies
10. Creating a diary of the network's progress  
(Section summary from self assessment record 2004)

The annual review outlines these activities in more detail, including the organisation of the network which is described as follows:

SIG co-ordinators meet half-termly and at conferences to disseminate their research and findings... The network is led and facilitated by two co-leaders and recently a network facilitator has been appointed to further develop links within and outside of the network. A strategy group [has] an overview of the network's initiatives and manages its direction so that the aims of the network are fulfilled. It is in this forum [with representatives from member schools] that financial decisions are made. (Self assessment record 2004)

This confirms the formation of interest groups outlined in the initial bid and describes multiple layers of network management including two co-leaders (a stipulation of the NLC programme), an internal network facilitator, and regular coordination meetings for the SIG coordinators and network strategy groups. These were part of a series of events outlined in the same document, which included bi-annual conferences (although documents cited above suggest the NCSL were sceptical about the extent of participation in these events). This document highlights other features of the network, such as learning walks and other inquiry groups, namely headteachers and pupils, emphasising the importance of action research to this network, an issue explored in more detail below.



## Action research in Network 1

The action research aspirations of Network 1 were outlined in the bid made to the NCSL. This describes action research (termed action enquiry) as an expectation of member schools.

All schools will develop an action enquiry approach to learning and will contribute to the knowledge creation of the network as a whole. (Network 1 application for funding, 2002)

The intention was to make action research, conducted within individual schools, the foundation upon which the network was developed and through which practices in member schools could be changed. This bid goes on to outline four intended activities of the network, if it was successful in attaining funding, of which three explicitly identify different applications of action research.

- Termly Headteacher Conference - deals with leadership and learning foci and dissemination of research.
- Headteachers' Action Research Group – headteachers will engage in a group project to be disseminated across the network...
- Pupil Action Research Groups –will promote school to school working, school visits, video conferencing and use of ICT.
- SIG Action Research Groups - (when current two year projects come to an end - July 2003), SIG groups will focus on common areas of work in order to work more closely together.  
(Network 1 application for funding 2002)

This bid was based around an existing network and so outlined how existing practices were to be developed as a part of the Networked Learning Communities' (NLC) programme. An example of this was the change in the organisation of school groups to cluster under common foci, thus making them more 'networked'. School based action research appears to provide the basis for the network being both a shared activity between schools and a mechanism through which stakeholder groups could have a say in the operation of the network, and of any changes which result. These issues were also explored in the analysis of questionnaire outlined in the following section.

## ***Analysis of questionnaires***

This analysis is based around questionnaires completed by a purposive sample of participants who had been involved in the action research aspects of the network. This sample selection, and access and entry negotiations, had been discussed with network co-leaders who had agreed that an approach could be made to headteachers' and the SIG coordinators. Headteachers of member schools were happy for this research to proceed and also, where they had been involved in action research themselves, agreed to complete a questionnaire. At a meeting SIG coordinators also agreed to take part and indicated that they would both complete the questionnaire and would ask SIG colleagues if they were also happy to do so. Questionnaires were distributed at that meeting and completed questionnaires returned by post to the researcher. In the event, 23 SIG members and coordinators agreed to complete questionnaires.

The way that access and entry were negotiated in this case study made it possible to identify a participant's school. However, this was thought to be inappropriate for a number of reasons. First, this is intended to be a case study of a network and, whilst individual schools in this network operated differently, it was felt more appropriate to treat this as a variation within case, not a basis for comparison. Secondly, the conditions on which access and entry were negotiated in other case studies, made inter-school comparison impossible and so a discussion of school comparisons here would not be replicable in those case studies. Finally, participants were selected because of their active involvement in network activities. This was a relatively small number of individuals which challenges both an attempt to make judgements by school (and the implication that school, rather than personal, context affects certain responses) and the ethical agreement with participants that neither they nor their institutions would be identified. Participants in this research were asked to describe their own approach to networked action research and this is explored in the discussion of interview data although, as this is an exploration of participant perceptions and is not used to characterise institutions, this is not believed to compromise ethical conditions in the same way.

## Participant responsibility profile

The questionnaire comprised 22 questions resulting in 198 individual items in the SPSS database. Section 1 examined participant characteristics including identifying the most senior responsibility of these participants (see Table 4.1).

	Frequency	Percent
Subject coordinator/head of department	7	30.4
Class teacher	6	26.1
Headteacher	4	17.4
Deputy headteacher	3	13.0
Head of year/other pastoral responsibility	2	8.7
Key stage coordinator	1	4.3
Teaching assistant	0	0
Learning support assistant	0	0
Total	23	100.0

**Table 4.1: frequency table for participant responsibilities**

No participants identified themselves as being either a teaching or learning support assistant, thus all questionnaire participants were teaching staff in participating schools, including four headteachers. As questionnaire participants identified themselves as being active inquirers, this supports the suggestion in the documentary analysis that headteachers formed an inquiry group although, with no responses from non-teaching staff, it does raise questions about the scope of network participation<sup>10</sup>.

## Motivations for involvement in networked inquiry

This questionnaire explored reasons why these individuals first became involved in networked inquiry. Participants were asked to indicate how significant the issue in question was in their involvement in inquiry on a scale from 0-3. Most options concerned personal motivations but participants could indicate that they had been either persuaded or instructed to join one of the network inquiry activities. Responses to this item are presented in two ways, the first being descriptive statistics shown below in Table 4.2.

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<sup>10</sup> N.B. this questionnaire was written for adults only and so no responses were requested from students.

	N	Range	Mean
2.1.05 Support student learning	23	3.00	2.60
2.1.07 Establish Best Practice	23	3.00	2.57
2.1.06 Support student achievement	23	3.00	2.57
2.1.02 Support school improvement	23	3.00	2.48
2.1.01 Improve classroom practice	23	3.00	2.30
2.1.10 Raise school standards	23	3.00	2.04
2.1.03 Increase subject knowledge	23	3.00	2.00
2.1.04 Improve Job Satisfaction	23	3.00	1.87
2.1.08 Support other schools	23	3.00	1.39
2.1.13 Support colleagues inquiry	23	3.00	1.30
2.1.11 Improve chance of promotion	23	3.00	0.91
2.1.14 Persuaded to do inquiry	23	3.00	0.82
2.1.12 Social Justice	23	3.00	0.78
2.1.09 Accredited course	23	3.00	0.60
2.1.15 Directed to do inquiry	23	3.00	0.39
Valid N (listwise)	23		

**Table 4.2: reasons for becoming involved in networked inquiry (0=not relevant, 1=slightly relevant, 2= relevant and 3=very relevant reason)**

A number of issues are worth emphasising in these responses. All 23 participants completed this section and all items have a full range of responses from 0, not relevant, to 3 for very relevant. This suggests that the choices, and scale provided, both had relevance to participants. This table also provides a measure of central tendency (in this case mean<sup>11</sup>). This gives a sense of the relative strength of these reasons in their decision to become involved in networked inquiry. Participants identified much more strongly with three response items, which all had a mean of over 2.5:

1. Supporting student learning.
2. Establishing best practice.
3. Supporting student achievement.

This suggests that participants were focussed on student performance and were motivated by the potential of the network to identify and share best practice. These responses, and the next two most popular, to improve schools and classrooms, provide an interesting comparison with networking and participatory intervention literature

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<sup>11</sup> It is recognised that the use of mean as a measure of central tendency with ordinal data is believed, by some, to be inappropriate (Blaikie, 2003; Jamieson, 2004). However the arguments made by other authors that the mean as a measure of central tendency and statistical techniques which derive from it (such as T-test and Anova) are sufficiently robust to provide meaningful measures of central tendency and comparisons between groups (Dawes, 2008; Pell, 2005) are taken to provide sufficient justification for the use of mean over other measures of central tendency, such as median and mode, in this case.

which emphasise the importance of providing opportunities for individuals and communities to develop their own knowledge uninfluenced by governmental influence. In this case, it seems that participants associated strongly with an agenda which, whilst potentially related to personal aspirations and experience, could also be associated with national education policy and standards judgements.

Only one participant identified that they had been directed to become involved in the inquiry, so membership of this network seems to be based more on negotiation and voluntarism than on directive management, for all but one participant. These responses suggest that advocacy was far more common than coercion or direction.

### Selection of action research topics

This questionnaire also explored some of the influences on the topic or focus for inquiry. This multiple choice question was coded as binary responses for each of eight possible responses. The number of occasions that each was selected is shown in Figure 4.1. Again all participants recorded a response to this question and there were no missing data.

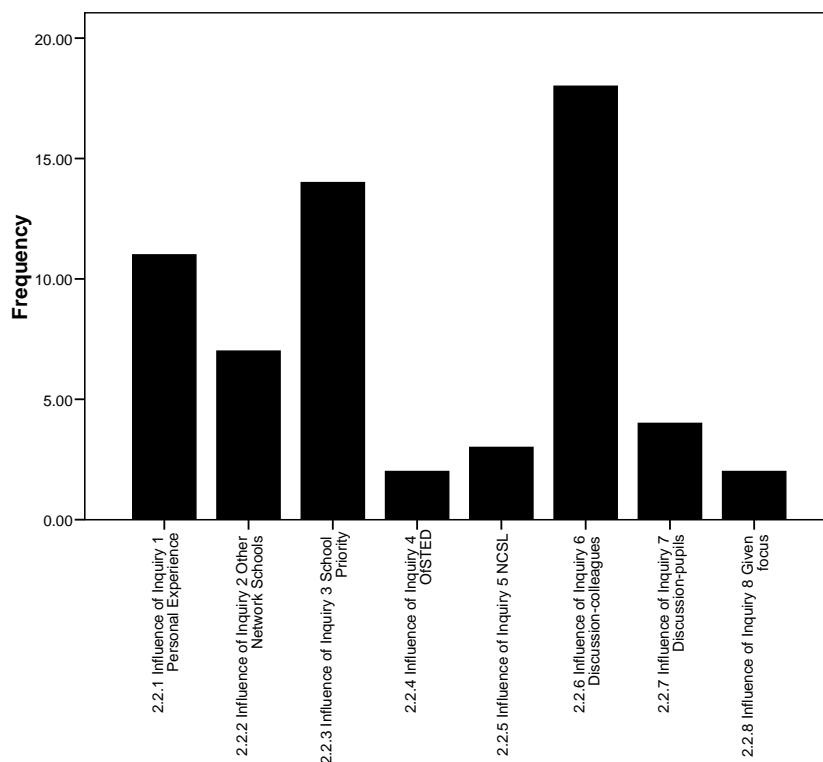


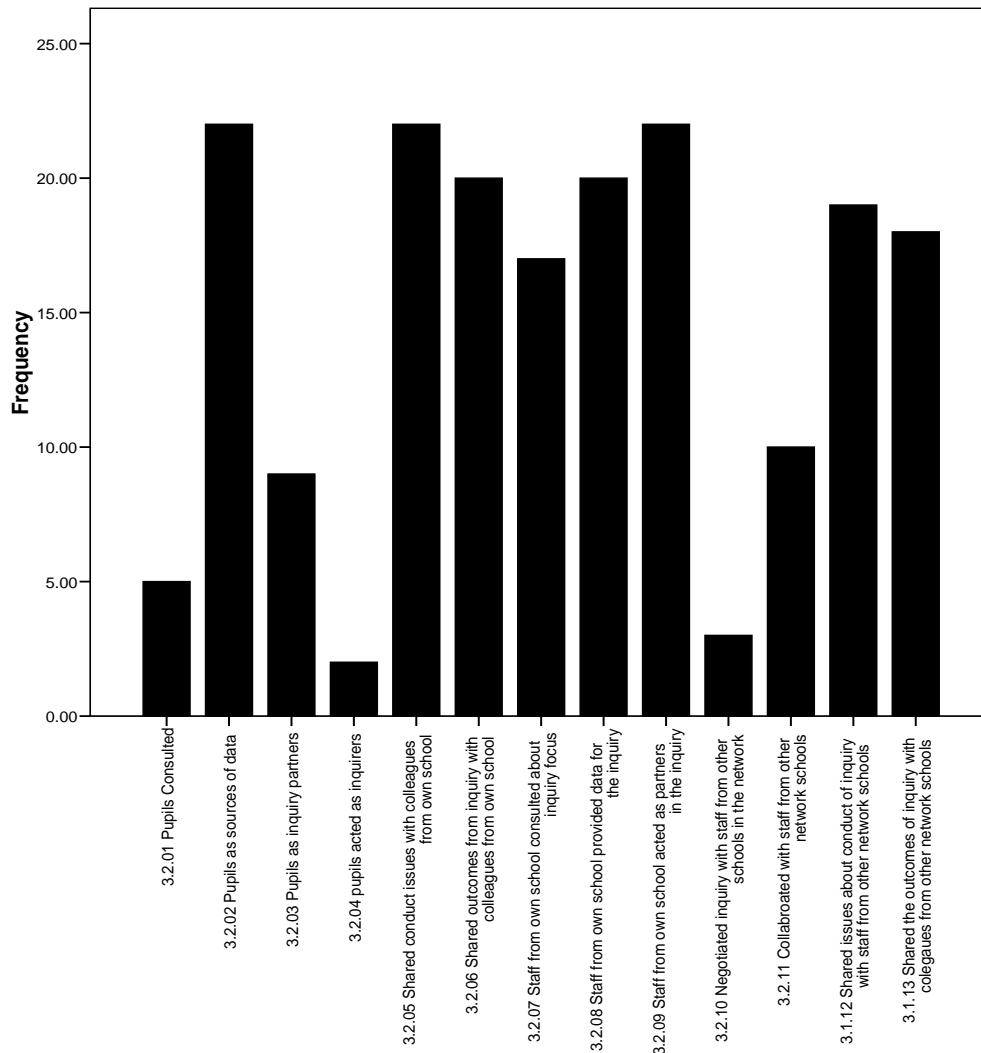
Figure 4.1: frequency of responses for influence on topic of inquiry

Figure 4.1 suggests the largest effect on topics selected for inquiry was ‘discussion with colleagues’, mainly from within the participant’s own school (7 of 23 participants identified being influenced by another network school). Whilst this seems to contradict the between-school aspirations of the network, it does suggest that inquiry work is rooted mainly in personal and individual school practices (the second and third most popular responses were for the inquiry topic being influenced by school priority and personal experience), and that it is informed by dialogue with colleagues.

Additional interesting features that come from this question include the relatively low incidence of topics being derived from either OfSTED or from the NCSL. This supports the view that issues to be addressed were derived more from experience than from directed priorities. Bearing in mind the success of this network in obtaining the full three years of funding, this suggests that the process was not tied to NCSL directed change and that networks were afforded some degree of freedom. This also suggests that the interests in improvement and best practice noted above were derived not from external sources, but from individual and collective views on quality and improvement. Finally, a relatively small number of participants identified ‘pupil negotiation’ as having a significant role in establishing a topic for inquiry (selected by 4 of 23 participants), suggesting a limited involvement of pupils in the early stages of inquiry.

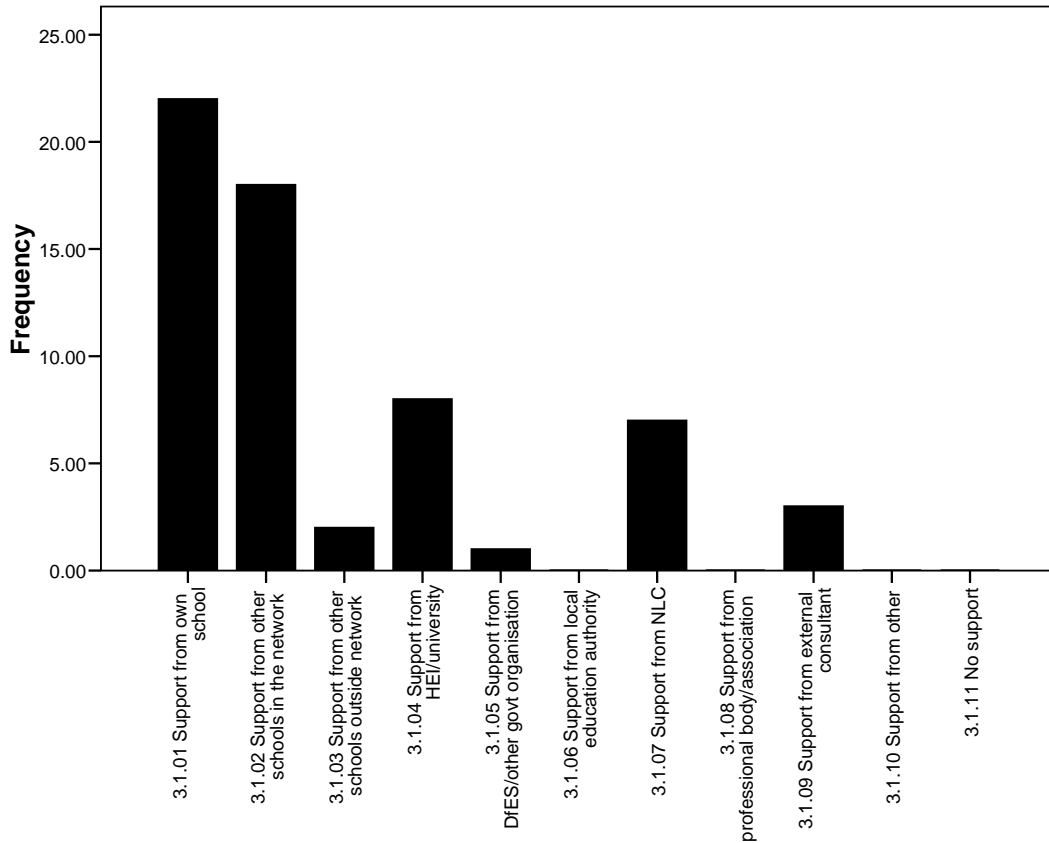
### **Collaborative relationships and networked action research**

Question 3.2 explored the ways in which participants had worked with others. This multiple choice question had 13 possible responses, the results of which are shown in Figure 4.2 below. This suggests that, in the majority of cases, pupil involvement was limited to being sources of data. However, it reaffirms views of the network, developed above, as being based around individual school groups as the most popular responses referred to collecting data from, and sharing inquiry processes with, ‘colleagues from own school’ (responses 5-8).



**Figure 4.2: frequency of responses for item 3.2: inquiry partners**

Although collaboration with other schools was more limited than within-school collaboration, several participants indicated that the conduct and outcomes of inquiry were shared with network members from other schools. This suggests that, whilst based around inquiry work conducted in individual schools, opportunities were created for the wider dissemination of outcomes and discussion of progress with colleagues from other network schools. This view is reinforced by a further question asking who had supported the inquiry work of the participant. This multiple choice question was coded as 11 binary items shown in Figure 4.3 below.



**Figure 4.3: frequency of responses for item 3.1, support for inquiry**

The overwhelming majority of responses supported this school-centred view of the network, with 22 of 23 participants indicating that they had received support from colleagues in their own school. There was also a positive response to the second option, suggesting that 18 of 23 participants had received support from other network schools. It seems that, whilst other schools often did not influence the choice of inquiry focus, they did support colleagues in the conduct of their inquiry.

Together, these responses provide a picture of a network based around individual school inquiry groups arranged within a network which provided opportunities for dialogue (but without extensive collaboration) with other network schools, although with a limited role for pupils. The inquiry work of these groups is based more around individual experience than externally driven change, issues further explored in the analysis of interviews.



## ***Analysis of interviews***

A number of themes have emerged from the analysis of interviews. These are explored below in two main groups, the first outlining issues around the organisation of the network, and the second exploring the relationship between networking, power and control.

Participation in interviews was negotiated through two mechanisms; firstly the questionnaire provided opportunities for participants to record their willingness to participate in the interview stage of research. Secondly, as requested by the network, potential participants were approached by the network appointed facilitator. As a result, eight participants volunteered for the interview stage of research. Their roles are shown in table 4.3.

Participant.	Details.
1	Inquiry group member
2	Inquiry group coordinator
3	Inquiry group member
4	Inquiry group member
5	Headteacher and network co-leader
6	Headteacher and network co-leader
7	Inquiry group coordinator
8	Inquiry group coordinator

**Table 4.3: details of interview participants**

Interviews were semi structured, being based around a series of common questions which encouraged participants to tell the story of their involvement with the network and outline the process of inquiries as a part of it. This structure was flexible, with opportunities for participants to identify and explore issues of importance to them.

## **Organisation and management of the network**

Interview participants spoke about the organisation of the network and how they had worked within that structure, including the involvement of member schools.

### *School membership of Network 1*

Network membership was open to schools who taught primary or middle school aged pupils in the local area. Recruitment was initially managed by the advisor who had co-founded the network who approached schools to suggest that they might like to become involved, and invited them to attend meetings at which the operation of the network was outlined.

We [the school] heard about the network through our attached advisor [name] and she was very much involved with it at that stage and she encouraged us to join the network (Network 1 Participant 7)

The opportunity to go to the original talk [introducing the network] came up and... so I popped along, saw the presentation, and thought, yea, yea I want to be part of that. (Network 1 Participant 5)

Involvement in the network was made initially as a result of consultation with headteachers. This was later formalised in the stage of the network as a Networked Learning Community, during which both the headteacher and chair of governors of participating schools were required to sign forms indicating their commitment. The leadership of member schools emerged as a critical feature of the maintenance of network membership, and changes in senior leadership were associated with a turnover in network membership.

I think the biggest impact has been when certain schools haven't continued because there have been changes in the leadership... when one headteacher left a school... the replacement wasn't as committed (Network 1 Participant 8)

This turnover seemed to have been buffered by the funding associated with membership of the NLC programme. The funded phase of the network represented a relatively stable period for the network with fewer schools dropping out, regardless of headteacher turnover.

We had a very stable group of schools for a number of years with funding and then, after the funding diminished, I think that that changed the nature of the network. (Network 1 Participant 8)

Whilst network membership was negotiated with senior staff, the network was set up to involve a broad range of individuals from member schools. This was achieved

through a range of process and structures, which are discussed in the following section.

### *Network processes and structures*

Interview participants confirmed the features of the network highlighted by the documentary analysis above namely: the meetings and conferences established by the network; the organisation of School Inquiry Groups (SIGs), and the common concern with pupil voice. Participants also elaborated on the change in the network over its life to date, in particular identifying the different nature of the network before and during involvement with the NLC programme.

...originally it was different because it was a local authority advisor who coordinated it along with two university representatives and they were very much in control of it and would send out meeting notes etc... so really it was led by the authority and university representatives. (Network 1 Participant 8)

This initial stage was one in which the coordination and management of the network were managed externally. The same participant viewed joining the NLC programme as marking the most significant change in the nature of the network, especially because of changes to the coordination and leadership of the network associated with this programme.

The biggest change to the network when we joined the networked learning communities was that we then had co-leaders, two head teachers took on that role and found it very demanding and that is how I came to get involved as the network facilitator as they wanted someone to do various bits and pieces. (Network 1 Participant 8)

It may be that the leadership and coordination issues, at the inception of the funded stage of the network, were especially significant for Participant 8 as this was the point at which they had taken up the internal network facilitator role<sup>12</sup>. Participant 8 characterised this transition as moving from coordination by external personnel to coordination by network members, especially the co-leaders and network facilitator.

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<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that this role was in addition to the external facilitators appointed by the National College for School Leadership Networked Learning Group. This facilitator was a senior teacher in a network school and had been active in the inquiry work of the network prior to it becoming a part of the Networked Learning Communities programme.

To another participant, becoming part of the NLC Programme also changed the network. This was related to the implementation of NCSL networking strategies, specifically learning walks, and the opportunity, resulting from funding, to bring in high quality speakers from outside the network to present at network events.

[Joining the Networked Learning Communities programme] changed the network quite a lot because then we had funding to do things like the learning walks... it [also gave] the opportunity for more cross fertilisation between the schools. We had opportunities to go and meet colleagues and the resources to see good quality speakers and that makes a big difference. (Network 1 Participant 5)

Membership of the NLC programme is therefore seen as an enabler, both in the sense that funding gave the network opportunities to further develop its work, and in the specific strategies that the programme championed. Despite concerns about the extent of participation in these events raised by the NCSL personnel (see documentary analysis), conferences were believed to be events in which members could meet, talk and share developments and practices with other network personnel, invited guests and external speakers and so were a stimulus for change.

Milestones conferences... run twice a year... The January one has been helpful because it stimulates thought and the summer ones have been a summary of and sharing of practice... and I think that that is really important and so I think if you don't have those then you aren't aiming for anything... the regular meeting dates do make you move something on. (Network 1 Participant 8)

This was complemented by the changed role of consultants from coordinators to facilitators that resulted from NLC funding. These consultants, through their external perspective on the work of inquiry groups, were seen as providing a stimulus for action.

I kept a record of what we were doing for each time the consultant came in... so when it came to meeting... I knew what had happened... [This] made me stop, take stock and think it through, rather than just carrying on and everybody just doing their own thing, it made me put the whole thing together as a project... When we talked [with the consultant]... I went away really clear knowing what I was going to do next ... it was really good to have an outsider coming in, because we know our school and children and we knew what we wanted to do but it was really helpful to have someone from outside saying: 'have you thought of this...have you thought about this way of trying something?' which maybe we hadn't thought about. It's keeping the

momentum going, having put all of the energy into setting it up it is easy to let it go! (Network 1 Participant 7)

The role of consultants was to support the large network events and also provide assistance for the distributed aspect of the network, i.e. the School Inquiry Groups. These groups were brought together within each network school to conduct and lead inquiries across the school as a whole.

We meet as a group, at least every half term, [the SIG coordinator] chairs the meetings... and then we all have an input and discuss things and get given things to do. I have also been... involved with the end of year writing day, it works really well ... The results of [inquiries] have always been fed back to staff, more recently the whole school has been involved in doing the research as well. In the very beginning the [SIG] did all of the research and... the results were fed back but now it is more of a whole school thing. (Network 1 Participant 3)

The work of the inquiry groups was shared through verbal and written presentations, which were supported by another network event, the writing days. The SIGs were the main focus for the inquiry activity of the network. Issues of their operation are explored in the following section.

### ***The operation of School Inquiry Groups (SIGs)***

Of the three communities of inquirers identified by the network, the School Inquiry Groups (SIG) appear to have been the site of the majority of inquiry activity (the other groups being headteacher and pupil inquiry groups). By being the basis for school based inquiry, the shared feature of network schools, they were the means by which personnel in member schools could participate in the network. These groups were intended to be supported by senior leaders in ways that did not overly influence the work of the inquiry groups. This has been a source of frustration to some headteachers.

As a headteacher I had certain reservations with [how the SIG were working]... because I would have driven it more but of course part of our initial agreement was that the headteachers wouldn't drive it, it would come from the SIG and so that was a frustration to begin with and you could just see that if we did this, this and this, the outcomes were going to be better. (Network 1 Participant 5)

The role for headteachers seems, therefore, to be to advocate, champion and authorise, without excessively intervening in the process of networked inquiry in ways which might compromise the participant-led aspirations of networking. Some headteachers felt that they have had to be active in this support role.

There came a point... where I felt that I had to take more of a front seat role, because I think if I hadn't then it might have died... I had very much taken a back seat from the day to day SIG work initially... I never became the coordinator but I had to push the coordinator... and make sure that the coordinator coordinated. (Network 1 Participant 6)

The organisation of school inquiry groups varied. In some schools, small groups of interested people were brought together to form a SIG. The challenge, in this case, was to create links between the group and other staff in the school, especially within the context of a school with a relatively large number, and high turnover, of staff.

It started with interest, who wanted to be involved? There have always been five of us and we have tried to meet every half term... when we did something as a small group it worked, it was fine but we did that initially to trial something that we then went whole school with, like the marking and feedback work which was very productive, I do think that that was productive... [but] I suppose an issue for us in this school was that we have had a lot of staff changes and having to keep going over those things is sometimes difficult, we tried to keep it whole school. (Network 1 Participant 8)

This approach, adopted in several network schools, started with invitations to individuals join the inquiry group, following which the group would then select an appropriate focus for their inquiry and conduct their work in reference to other staff. Each group is led by a coordinator who manages the operation of their SIG and represents them at SIG coordinators' meetings. In some cases, the SIG coordinator has had responsibility for inviting potential members, in doing so attempting to make these groups representative of the school staff.

As SIG coordinator I have organised it that I would always try to get somebody from each year group so, if somebody was leaving or something like that then I would actually... go and ask, would you like to be a part of the SIG group? And most people have said, 'oh yea, that would be really nice, I have heard about the work and I would be very interested'. (Network 1 Participant 2)

To some participants, however, this approach is believed to have its limitations. Participant 5, for example, feels that many staff had little knowledge of the initial work of their school inquiry group.

Originally... it started being driven by a small group... but probably most of the school didn't know what was going on other than they were given questionnaires and talked to by the SIG group so initially... although it was a part of the school improvement plan [it was] a small group that were doing it and maybe some staff didn't know what was going on. (Network 1 Participant 5)

Because of the challenge experienced by small groups working with the wider school population, some schools made the decision to turnover SIG members, in doing so broadening membership.

It was intentional to bring the teaching assistants into the group, and it was also intentional that we didn't keep the same membership all of the time, that we didn't force people into it. We wanted to continue with this thing about it being voluntary. (Network 1 Participant 6)

As a response to concerns about the relationship between the SIG and other staff, some schools changed the SIG from a small group developing their own practices to establish it as a group leading changes amongst all staff. This was achieved through directed time associated with formal school management structures, such as school development plans.

The only problem came much later, say the last year of two, when I think [that] being a member of the SIG group seemed to become a bigger issue in that it was felt as if it was a bolt on extra, and... it was only really at that point that we made sure it was a full part of the school improvement plan and that there was an expectation on all staff that they would [be involved in some capacity]. It became part of what the whole school did... it was whole school staff meetings that led the project, but then a smaller group would do the development work behind the scenes but it would always involve the whole staff so that it wasn't seen as a bolt on extra. (Network 1 Participant 6)

This approach provides the SIG with a formal role for leading changes across the school potentially involving all members of staff by embedding inquiry in the operational systems of the school. A further alternative was to establish a SIG which involved all staff.

We managed to keep pretty much the whole SIG for a couple of years, the problems came when people started leaving, they actually worked very hard

and did a lot of stuff and then other colleagues were reluctant to join, and we went through a phase where there were still two or three people doing it but we didn't extend the group any further... we came at the whole school approach a bit later, it was... that [that] revived it all again really, because everyone was involved there, so there has always been issues of membership. (Network 1 Participant 5)

Including all staff in a SIG was introduced in some schools as a result of experience they gained through their period of network membership. Other schools, new to the network, consulted existing members and, as a result of the experiences of other schools, made the decision to involve all staff in their SIG from the start.

I think we learned a lot, joining when we did, from other schools ... we set up our research up differently having been to the first few meetings where we talked to other schools about what they were doing and we learned... the pitfalls, the fact that little SIG groups were sometimes finding it difficult to work with and get their work through the school. From that we sat down and made the decision that our SIG group was going to be whole school, obviously we weren't going to force it on people but we were going to set it up and say, does everybody want to be in the SIG group?... We're really lucky that we work in a school here that everybody is all together and wants to be a part of it and so the group was set up with everybody in it and I think that has made a great difference to what we have achieved. (Network 1 Participant 7)

This whole school approach is believed to allow inquiry work to be embedded within the management and operation of the school. The intention is that school inquiry work is conducted within the parameters of staff contracts and workload, and can be conducted through meetings and other features of directed time.

We didn't so much make the decision of what we were going to do, we made the decision to talk to everybody who wanted to be involved and, if we did it as a whole school, it could be done through staff meeting time rather than other times we were trying not to put more onto people and trying to make them meet additional times and after schools and other meetings and if it was an after school meeting therefore it could be built in. (Network 1 Participant 7)

The challenge network schools seem to be facing, therefore, is to ensure representation of as many staff as possible, and getting the greatest impact from inquiry work by directly relating it to whole school priorities, whilst sustaining the voluntary principles of the network.



### *Extending the boundaries of participation: pupil voice and networking*

The participation of staff through the action research groups was extended through a parallel initiative concerned with engaging with pupil voice. The two relate as this concern with pupil voice has provided a means by which SIGs engage with pupil perceptions.

Well the pupil voice has become more important actually, than anything, out of the different things we have done as a part of the research... the actual opportunity to ask children about what is going on, as opposed to just asking them to record it, has become more powerful, within the school. (Network 1 Participant 1)

The form of pupil consultation described in the interview extract above has been extended to the establishment of school (pupil) councils in network schools, in particular where SIG members have had a responsibility for both.

To involve children in the inquiry process... is similar to school council really, I let them know that I am the teacher voice, they are the pupil voice and I am just there as a guide... and that really it is all about them. In the same respect we thought it shouldn't necessarily be us interviewing children, we didn't want them to be interviewed by teachers and think that they can't give their true opinion [and so students interviewed each other]. (Network 1 Participant 4)

This model integrates with the inquiry aspirations of the network. Pupils were consulted on the topics for inquiries but they have also been involved in the collection of data to inform research led by the SIG. The application of pupil voice initiatives is an area where schools have changed practices in response to what they have learnt from each other. School (pupil) councils have been introduced widely across network schools, a change which has been strongly associated with the work of the network.

When we had meetings where everyone came together [with a common focus] there seemed to be a little bit more commonality rather than just hearing about different people's enquiries... I know certainly with [another network school] it was because of the pupil voice that they set up the school council so in a way they changed their practice because of what was going on within the network. (Network 1 Participant 2)

The common focus on pupil voice also marked a change in the way that the network organised action research groups. Originally the common feature of network schools

was a commitment to develop practices through action research with the topics SIGs investigated being left to individual groups to decide. However, network personnel decided to change this organisation and establish shared foci which would be addressed by all inquiry groups; pupil voice was one such focus.

[The network] originally had flexibility that you could follow your own agenda, but we got to the stage, pupil voice for instance, of looking at a joint thing and I think that was useful as well. (Network 1 Participant 5)

This was also been perceived to be a successful aspect of the network and has allowed schools to remain at the forefront of educational developments, ahead of government bodies such as OfSTED.

And we didn't have a school council and now we do and that is a direct effect of the network, it is very effective and... we have got a lot from it... Of course now it is a big thing nationally... I've noticed that OfSTED [expect] to see evidence of it so it's not that we have driven a national agenda, but it is nice to have implemented it before it had been imposed! (Network 1 Participant 6)

Pupil voice was seen as both an aspect of inquiry, through consulting with pupils about the work of inquiry groups, and as an intended outcome of the network itself, through the development of pupil voice initiatives. This concern with pupil voice, and other aspects of the structures and processes of the network described above, relate in a number of ways to participatory interventions which are explored in the following section.

## **Networking, power and control**

The literature review established the significance attributed to political contexts in both participatory interventions and educational networks. In both, the intention is to provide some kind of buffer between externally imposed knowledge (and associated policy) and the understanding, aspirations and beliefs of communities, in this case network members. This is related to power and control, issues which emerged regularly with interview participants in Network 1 being cited by a number of them as a factor in their decision to become involved in the network. This section explores three interpretations of these issues, the first of which concerns ownership over change.

### ***Ownership over change***

Participant perceptions have a number of features but the first is the feeling that involvement in Network 1 provided a mechanism through which participants could gain some control over change and that such changes would therefore be relevant.

I think it was the fact that things were going to be relevant to you as a teacher, and also, the fact that you could have some control over it, rather than initiatives being foisted upon you and you having to make it work in the classroom, here was something that one could investigate and could try and improve and in a way do one's own thing with this. (Network 1 Participant 2)

The ability to identify a focus for change was also seen as a motivating feature of these networks which encouraged greater 'ownership' in the network as a whole, and in the practices associated with it, in contrast to externally imposed initiatives.

Generally speaking with national initiatives, they come out and they change and you adapt them to your own circumstances whereas this is our own agenda and you had ownership from the start and that is more motivating I think. (Network 1 Participant 5)

It seems, therefore, that whilst there is a degree to which schools and practitioners adapt centralised policy, and associated practices, the approach of this network in starting from an examination of personal aspirations was seen as motivating factor.

### ***The development of practitioner communities***

Other ways of characterising this issue of power and control related to bringing together groups of education practitioners in communities. To some participants, the collaborative aspects of networking were believed to be significant in achieving ownership of the development of educational practices.

We talked about it and thought that there was a lot to be gained as a school going forward together, learning together, and going forward as a community, and we thought that that would be very positive for us, so we made the decision to go ahead and join... the thing that encouraged us was that we felt that we had control and were able to choose what we wanted to do... it wasn't something that the government wanted us to do or any of the initiatives from outside that pile in. (Network 1 Participant 7)

Community formation seemed directly related to the control school members had over the choice to both join the network and identify an area of change. This is seen as

being motivating in itself, but is also believed to be a mechanism which allows for the transfer of practices between schools, which may be perceived to be in direct competition and therefore have had little opportunity to collaborate.

The idea of getting to know other schools and learning from other schools was very positive... the fact that you could talk to other people, learn something and work together is a positive thing... That's something that I think we hadn't done as much of since the national curriculum came in everyone was very much focussed on their own little school and getting everything right in their own eyes and not necessarily talking to other schools about what they are doing. (Network 1 Participant 7)

This opportunity to share practices and experiences, whilst associated directly with the network, was not limited to the topics identified by inquiry group members as the network was believed to provide opportunities for transfer of practice beyond the topic or scope of the inquiry groups. Members of these groups were believed to act as a conduit for the transfer of practices on behalf of colleagues who were not active SIG members, a point made by Participant 4 who also contrasts the collaborative nature of the network against a competitive culture associated with national education policy.

If another school has said 'we're focussing on this because we see it as something that is particularly important at the moment, or something particularly concerning', if we know that there are other classes or issues in the school that are similar we can put people in contact and... even if we don't make it part of a SIG inquiry we can still learn from other people's inquiries... there is often far too much competitive attitudes between school really, and not enough working together to solve issues and if they have got similar problems, if something works, let us know. (Network 1 Participant 4)

The formation of the types of collaborative communities aspired to by these networks is directly contrasted against competition regarded as unhealthy and derived from a market model of education (echoing the aspirations of networks outlined in chapter 2). Collaboration provided an opportunity not only to develop knowledge and practice through inquiry but also as a means of transferring practice between each other and on behalf of other colleagues. The voluntary basis of the network was believed to have been influential in this process, an aspect of the network explored in the following section.

### *Voluntarism and networking*

Although this network was initiated by local authority personnel, and received funding from a government agency for three years, the fact that schools could choose whether or not to join meant that participants saw the network as being voluntary and not being imposed by either government or the local authority.

I think one of the key things... for me has been that it is not government or local authority driven, it has been the work of volunteer schools... who have been keen on working together... My school is in a liaison group [which] really doesn't work, so I haven't got any partner schools to work with, being in this is fantastic. It is like minded schools who are keen to work together [we] have met people, shared ideas and good practice that we couldn't have done in our own liaison group and I think that is because it is a voluntary thing and we are all keen on it. (Network 1 Participant 6)

This participant links the voluntary nature of school involvement to the success of the network in contrast with other politically led, and managed, networks which, because of the obligation for membership associated with them, have been less successful. Whilst this is believed to have resulted in a more successful network, there are suggestions that this voluntarism might represent a more effective approach in comparison with externally enforced change, which is believed to result in resistance.

There is a natural reluctance I think to change in teachers, particularly when it is externally based and so even the stuff that is now taken for granted, the literacy strategy, the numeracy strategy, personalisation, all of the agendas that get pushed forward you do them, but beneath the whole attitude towards those things is different, you're doing them because you have to and OfSTED might come in next week, whereas [with the network] we don't have to do it, we want to do it, and I think that is the difference in the first place. (Network 1 Participant 6)

Voluntarism is seen as a common feature across all aspects of the network from the involvement of schools as a whole to the operation of individual school inquiry groups. Two aspects are highlighted by one participant who emphasises that the network has always given scope for schools to identify their own topic (sometimes under broad foci), thus providing opportunities for participants to address their own agendas. The second aspect is associated with the external consultants whose role evolved from coordinators of the network to facilitators, supporting network members to develop their own work (an approach more in keeping with the role of researchers

in participatory interventions). This is associated with the inception of the Networked Learning Communities programme and is regarded as a significant development.

We have never been a network that have all done the same thing, each school, [and] SIG chooses its own focus, which I think is important because if you don't allow schools their autonomy to decide on their own focus, it is centrally driven again, the work that the consultants do now is to facilitate enquiry work as opposed to leading the network. (Network 1 Participant 8)

The flexibility over the focus of inquiry topics for individual schools is matched with a similar flexibility over how schools organise their own inquiry groups. Inquiry groups varied in size but all emphasised the importance of voluntarism in their work. SIGs composed of a small number of staff are seen as providing chances for people to volunteer to join the group.

Well originally... we talked to the whole staff and we asked for volunteers, and initially we had about five people forthcoming and one of those people decided that they would be quite happy to be the SIG coordinator. (Network 1 Participant 6)

In schools with a whole staff inquiry group, the voluntary aspiration is related to negotiation. Rather than each member of staff being given the individual choice to opt in or out of the group, all staff were consulted on the structure of the inquiry group and, with their agreement, were then included as a part of the SIG.

[From talking to other schools] I felt people were finding it more difficult because some members of staff were in a SIG group some were not, some were being helpful and others didn't want to be involved, and therefore anything that was being done in the research within the school wasn't whole school, it was only a small part and when they tried to push it to other people it was a hard job... we didn't want people to feel left out... and so we gave people the choice... of being part of it and everyone wanted to be in it. (Network 1 Participant 7)

Whilst both extremes of SIG organisation, from small to whole staff groups, are believed, by these participants, to be based around a form of voluntarism, both are problematic. A small group, however representative it may be of the wider staff, and however much membership changes (thus allowing more staff to contribute), is still a relatively small proportion of the total staff within the school. Whilst involvement of all staff in an inquiry group does give everyone the opportunity to have a voice in

change, it also restricts the extent to which such a group can be considered truly 'voluntary'. There seems, therefore, a tension between voluntarism and representation derived for the organisational definition and boundaries of the network.

### ***Issues arising from this case***

This final section explores three themes that have emerged from the first case study namely: community participation and change; ownership, participation and networking, and centralised or distributed forms of networked inquiry.

### **Perceptions of community and forms of collaboration**

The documentary analysis suggested that development was arranged amongst three distinct communities, namely: headteachers; pupils and members of the school inquiry groups. The separation of headteacher and school inquiry groups is especially interesting seen in the light of the evidence, from both the documentary analysis and interviews, emphasising the importance of headteacher support of, without excessive interference in, the SIGs. This was identified in the Spring Enquiry report conducted by the Networked Learning Group at the NCSL (see documentary analysis), and was also discussed in interview with two headteachers (participants 5 and 6).

The aspirations of participatory intervention related projects refer to power, control and community participation as significant areas of their work (see chapter 2). Network members made decisions to identify distinct communities of action researchers, in doing so separating what would normally be regarded as the most powerful, headteachers, and least powerful, pupils, into separate groups. Whilst it would appear that the communities identified in this case study were interrelated, as they informed each other's work (for example pupils acting as sources of evidence for SIGs), there seems little direct collaboration. And yet one of the aspirations that participants had of this network was to encourage the development of collaborative communities within and between these schools in a climate of competition.

It seems that there were a number of levels where this collaborative community building occurred. The School Inquiry Groups (SIG) were the sites of collaboration as staff worked together through the process of inquiry, evidenced by the school-

centred nature of collaboration emphasised in the questionnaire analysis (see for example Figure 4.2 on page 112 and Figure 4.3 on page 113). School to school collaboration was based around the agreement for a common approach to the network (the SIG), through network events, or through visits conducted by inquiry group members from different schools. This approach to developing a community was related by participants to the voluntary nature of the network and its relationship with ownership and participation, issues explored in the following section.

### **Ownership, participation and networking**

The second issue concerns the relationship between the network and the perceived political context. This not only refers to national and local management of education but also to school-based micro-political climate. The signatories of networks participating in the programme (headteachers and governors) were held to account for the activity of the network, which was in turn dependent on the success of member schools (mainly the SIG). Yet interview participants described joining this network as an opportunity to gain ownership over change.

The accountability aspect of funded centrally advocated programmes could be seen as a challenge to the voluntary principles of the networks and to the aspirations participants had to gain ownership over change. The solution participants suggested in this case study (notably participants 5 and 6, both headteachers), and in spring enquiry reports of the NCSL, was related to the roles of those individuals and how they interacted. Headteachers and senior leaders had roles in which they acted as advocates of the network, and of individual SIGs, in doing so authorising inquiry groups' position within their schools. This is a role not unlike that of the researcher (facilitator) in participatory intervention programmes, the difference being that researchers invariably come from outside the community that they are working with, whilst headteachers are powerful stakeholders in the schools that form the network.

The negotiation over participation in inquiry groups varied (see section on the operation of the school inquiry groups page 118 onwards). In smaller schools, the entire staff would comprise the inquiry group but larger schools had three main ways of organising the inquiry group:



1. The SIG is a small group who keep other staff informed of their work.
2. The SIG is still a small group but has the responsibility of leading wider change involving other staff, i.e. taking a dispersed leadership role.
3. The SIG involves all staff with the inquiry seen as whole school.

Each raises different issues about the nature of participation. In the first, the major issue is disconnection between staff and the inquiry group. In the second, the SIG lead other staff, establishing a new leadership hierarchy in the school. In the third, all staff are involved but there are issues about whether such a set up can remain truly voluntary. The tension that these schools seem to be addressing is between the challenge of retaining the voluntary principles of participation without creating new school elites, which could create a new source of influence over school members who were not in the inquiry group. Both are challenges to the participatory aspirations of the network.

A final feature of ownership and participation issues concerns the pupil voice aspirations of the network. This was selected by the network as an overarching theme, was an interest of individual SIGs, and was an initiative of the Networked Learning Communities programme. Questionnaires suggested a fairly limited role for pupils in the inquiry aspects of this network, but interviews indicated alternative ways in which this had been achieved. There appeared to be a separation of the pupil voice aspirations of the network from inquiry groups as, whilst pupils were consulted by SIG members, no participants identified pupils as being members of their SIG. The work of school councils and other pupil voice initiatives were related to the network but seemed separate from the inquiry work of SIGs.

### **Centralised or distributed models of networked inquiry**

A final issue refers to the organisation of the network as a whole. In this case, the main operational features of the network were inquiry groups based in participating schools. In this respect, Network 1 is a network of organisations with participation defined and organised through individual member schools (an issue identified in each aspect of the analysis). Furthermore, this was not a network that required commitment to particular ways of organising these groups, or imposed a particular focus beyond broad overarching topics, such as pupil voice. The network operated

on a dispersed basis with participating schools making a general commitment to inquiry. However, it did so with centralised features, for example in providing spaces and opportunities for dialogue and potential collaboration to develop, such as through the network events (see documentary analysis and the interview analysis). The third issue deals with exactly this tension and questions what is seen as the requirements of network membership and operation, which are then a prerequisite of network membership, and what aspects of the network should be left to the individual school to define in reference to its own context.

The requirements, or conditions, of network membership seem to have been: the common commitment to staff led inquiry; involvement in a common series of network events, which provided opportunities for dialogue and interaction between members; and the role of co-leaders, facilitators, consultants and SIG coordinators. The areas of flexibility concerned: the composition of SIG; how the SIG operated within the school, and the inquiry topic that they chose to explore. This final area of topics for inquiry is one in which there was some change, as early in the network's existence the choice of inquiry was completely open whilst later the network established a broad theme for inquiry work. Even so, this theme was very broad and decisions about the specific foci were still made by the school and the inquiry group. Network 1 established a core set of principles and practices which were shared across all member schools but with sufficient flexibility to allow for those schools to be able to organise the SIG and decide on a focus which was relevant for them. The challenge seemed to be to provide sufficient flexibility that schools could personalise the approach to their context but, at the same time, having sufficient commonality to retain a common network identity.

### ***Network 1 overview***

Network 1 is a network of primary schools which, during its three years of funding, had varied in size from 6 to 14 primary schools. The schools that comprised Network 1 had been working as a network prior to the inception of the Networked Learning Communities programme. This programme required the network to change a number of features of its work, including establishing a management team drawn from member schools (prior to gaining funding, the network had been managed by a local

HEI). However, despite some changes, the major feature of the network was retained, namely: the development of practices through the conduct of action research in school based groups comprising mainly teachers.

A range of issues, related to participatory interventions, were identified from the various sources of evidence drawn from Network 1. Participants spoke of a desire to embed projects in the work of member schools, thus ensuring greater ownership and a wider spread of impact across the network. They also emphasised the importance of keeping participation voluntary, although this seemed to present a challenge to the aspirations for whole staff SIG membership advocated by some. The school-based action research approach was a feature that member schools shared and so represents a common activity, which was a feature of the network, although the actual organisation of these groups varied between schools of which three approaches were described. In the first the group was formed and then conducted their own inquiry (feeding back results to colleagues), in the second a group was formed which then led the process of inquiry, in the third the whole staff constituted the inquiry group.

Direct collaboration between these school groups was generally limited to sharing the conduct and outcomes of individual projects rather than directly collaborating on common projects. Developments in the later years of the network established common foci which provided an additional shared element to their work but, even in these cases, the overarching foci were very broad and school groups interpreted them to match their own interests and priorities. Indeed, this mediation between shared processes and foci, and individual school centred practices, could be seen as a distinguishing feature of the network. In other words, the network was based around common activities conducted within (and not between) member schools.

## **Chapter Five: Case Study of Network 2**

### ***Introduction to Network 2***

Network 2 comprised 13 schools relatively close together and served by the same local authority. There was no suggestion in any network documentation that it had been operating as a network prior to the Networked Learning Communities programme. This network used the term ‘enquiry’ to refer to the action research dimensions of their work and, as a result, the term ‘enquiry’ is used throughout this chapter to refer to the action research aspects of their work.

This case study is based around three sources of evidence. The first is a series of documents which refer to Network 2 and which have been produced either by members of the network themselves, or by representatives of the Networked Learning Group at the National College for School Leadership. The second source of data is a questionnaire which explores participant perceptions of the network and the nature of their work. This questionnaire was only completed by action researchers, in this case 90 participants. The final source of data is a series of interviews conducted with participants from Network 2. In total, 10 members of Network 2 agreed to be interviewed.

### ***Discussion of the documentary analysis***

The nature and operation of Network 2 has been explored through documents derived from a number of sources including: documents produced by the network for members or potential members; by the network for the Networked Learning Group at the National College for School Leadership; by network members for dissemination at events, such as conferences and by the Networked Learning Group about Network 2. The specific documents used are:

1. The original bid that Network 2 made to the Networked Learning Communities programme in 2002.
2. The review of activity submitted by Network 2 to the Networked Learning group at the end of year 2 of funding, 2004.
3. A conference paper presented by a member of Network 2, 2005.
4. A guide to Network 2 produced by the network for members, 2003. This was not published beyond member schools.

5. A Spring Enquiry report produced by a representative of the Networked Learning Group at the National College for School Leadership, 2004.

These documents are discussed under three themes, the first of which explores the aspirations of Network 2.

## **The aspirations of Network 2**

The purposes and aspirations of Network 2 are articulated in (amongst others) the network guide, which was intended to provide an introduction to the network to existing and potential members. This guide describes this as being a network of primary schools serving an area of considerable disadvantage. The aspirations of this network are described as follows:

This learning community of 13 schools is located in the town of [name] in an area of considerable socio-economic disadvantage. The network almost covers 50% of the LEA as it is a small unitary authority. The community is based around a common and compelling learning focus. We have quite deliberately placed the emphasis on bottom up... improvement with a focus on re-professionalising the work of teachers. We wish to move towards shared values and aligned priorities. (Network 2 guide, 2003)

These aspirations are directly associated with an improvement agenda, and are seen as providing a mechanism through which education can be re-professionalised, implying that it has, in the eyes of network members, been de-professionalised. This mixing of improvement agendas with the professional status of education is an interesting observation, which suggests that improvement is better achieved through professional ownership of change than external policy measures. These barriers, and the reason why this was originally thought to be significant, are elaborated upon in the bid that the network made to the National College for School Leadership.

Standards of attainment in [city name] have risen significantly since the LEA was reorganised in 1996. Our improvement has been achieved at a faster rate than most LEAs nationally. This trend reflects a concerted strategy to improve the quality of teaching in our schools. We currently have a situation in which learners enjoy teaching that, according to OFSTED and our own self evaluation, is almost exclusively sound, commonly good and often very good. Despite this, our rate of improvement in terms of standards is slowing. This leads us to a hypothesis that there are other barriers to the learning of children that need to be identified and eliminated. (Network 2 bid, 2002)

The identification and removals of barriers to learning is associated directly with judgements made about the quality of education from student national test scores and in judgements of teaching and learning by member schools and by the external inspectorate, OfSTED. A further contextual factor relates to the trajectory of change at these schools. It seems that these schools had managed to improve attainment significantly but that this rate of change had slowed. The formation of the network was seen as a way to reinvigorate this slowing rate of change, proposing that there were additional barriers to learning than had already been identified and that the network provided the mechanism to exploring and addressing them.

## **The nature of enquiry in Network 2**

A conference paper presented by one of the network members emphasises the importance of practitioner enquiry to this process. This suggests that the network was based around a substantial number of practitioner enquirers in those 13 member schools.

Seventy two enquirers... are currently engaged in their own learning as they strive to uncover insight into the [Network Name] central pupil learning focus: what are the barriers that pupils encounter in their journey to become more powerful and successful learners. (Conference paper presented by member of Network 2, 2005)

This quote also suggests that the initial focus of the network was to identify and challenge barriers to pupil learning. Despite providing a broad overall focus for the network, it seems as though there was considerable scope for individual enquirers to establish their own focus, so long as the final aspiration was related to identifying and removing barriers to pupil learning.

Within this design, enquirers largely make their own decisions, follow their own instincts and make sense of their own learning. (Conference paper presented by member of Network 2, 2005)

This importance of practitioner enquiry is emphasised in the guide written by the network to share with current and potential members in 2003 at its inception.

We have established collaborative enquiry as our central and most powerful vehicle for learning and are building our leadership capacity through a major investment in our... enquiry process... We aim to innovate our practice, find

better ways of doing things and make our schools fantastic places to learn and work. (Network guide, 2003)

The network's approach to enquiry was intended to result in more innovative practices related to the improvement agenda noted above by 'unlocking the vast untapped potential in all our schools' (Network Guide, 2003). This topic, of identifying and unlocking barriers to learning, marked the first stage of the development of the network. This evolved during a second stage, as described by a representative of the Networked Learning Group in their Spring Enquiry report:

42 teachers stepped forward to take part in the launch of those groups in the spring of 2003. A further 26 joined a second cohort of enquirers in the spring of 2004. This time investigating aspects of the question *when learning is at its very best in [city name] what does it look like?* (NCSL spring enquiry, 2004)

This enquiry document suggests that the numbers of enquirers were steadily growing, from 42 at the inception of the network in 2002, to 69 at the production of this enquiry report in 2004 (and then to 72 in the 2005 conference paper quoted above). This document also elaborates on the nature of enquiry through the formation of enquiry groups. The composition of the initial enquiry groups seems, from this quote, to have been exclusively teachers (42 in total), although the roles of the extra 26 enquirers are not outlined. This enquiry report also suggests the development of an additional, complementary, focus to the original focus of addressing barriers to learning, i.e. to uncover the very best learning experiences in member schools.

## **The activities of Network 2**

These enquiries were conducted by groups of participants from different schools across the network and shared, between the groups and with other school members, at network events. The enquiry report from the NCSL outlines the nature of one of these events:

In February 2004 all of the teaching staff and classroom support staff were invited to [the network's] second annual conference. A central part of the day was an opportunity for the first cohort of enquiry groups to share their learning with [each other and] for the widest possible audience within the network to share their learning with colleagues from other schools... The day contained a rich mixture of learning opportunities. Keynote speakers brought their learning to the day. There were workshops and displays hosted by first cohort enquiry groups. There were also workshops hosted by colleagues from other networks,

who brought what they had been learning from their network enquiries.  
(NCSL spring enquiry, 2004)

These documents outline a network based around groups of enquirers working on particular topics but sharing their work at common events at which all members of participating schools were invited (including those not involved in inquiry groups), and opportunities were presented to discuss areas of interest with other invited guests. These meetings were amongst those outlined in the self-assessment review submitted by the network at the end of the second year of funding, which outlined a number of strategies for encouraging dialogue across the network based around 10 enquiry groups.

- Cross school enquiry groups continue to exchange knowledge between their own schools
- Termly enquiry group days enable exchange of knowledge between each of the 10 groups
- Enquiry group days provide facilitation for focus on good practice and scaffold report writing and artefact production.
- Network resources will support publishing of reports and artefacts, making them accessible across the LEA and wider system.
- Annual conferences provide platform [sic] for groups' showcasing of renewed good practice.
- Heads' study group will develop training events to be open to [member] schools with the intent of starting new practitioner enquiry groups.
- Community resources will be made available to two schools currently in difficulties.
- Heads' study group has committed to developing further as a learning community.

(Network 2 self assessment record, 2004)

The enquiry groups seemed, therefore, to be a central feature of the network, indeed there were aspirations to increase the number of enquiry group participants. These groups shared their work not only through the conference mentioned above but also through written reports and enquiry group meetings. As well as enlightening the operation of these groups, this document also identifies a separate enquiry group involving only headteachers, which raises some interesting questions about the nature of community involvement. This network also appears to be a supportive community, especially in cases where members are facing difficulties.

The documentary analysis reported above provides a picture of a network based around a series of enquiry groups, although it is not clear from this how these enquiry



groups related to individual schools. Nevertheless these groups seem to provide the basis for the network, which then operated through a series of events and reporting processes structured to enable enquirers to communicate with each other and network members about the process and outcomes of their enquiry. These issues are further explored in the questionnaire and interview analysis sections which follow.

### ***Analysis of questionnaires***

This analysis is based around questionnaires completed by 90 participants in Network 2 during the third year of their funding. Data collection had been negotiated with network co-leaders who, following discussions with headteachers of network schools, agreed that the network would participate. Co-leaders then approached members of the network to participate and, at their request, distributed questionnaires accordingly, returning those that had been completed. Exactly 90 participants completed and returned questionnaires, an impressive response which adds weight to the suggestion that this was a network with substantial and growing participation in the enquiry aspects of their work. Because one condition of participation in this research was for network co-leaders to distribute questionnaires themselves, it was not possible to identify individual schools from these questionnaires, except where individuals were happy to identify themselves for the purposes of further research.

### **Participant responsibility profile**

The questionnaire completed by the participants was conducted in conjunction with research being conducted by a group of university researchers on behalf of the Networked Learning Communities programme. This questionnaire comprised 38 questions in three sections which, when entered into SPSS produced 249 separate items. As noted in the methodology section, there are some slight difference in the structure and content of questionnaire distributed within the three networks. The design of this second questionnaire included questions applied in case study 1, enabling the same issues to be explored in each case. There were also additional questions specifically related to the university study, which are not as relevant to this work and so were not included in the questionnaire used in Network 1 and are not discussed here. The first section of the questionnaire explored the profile of participants. The responses to this are shown in Table 5.1 below.

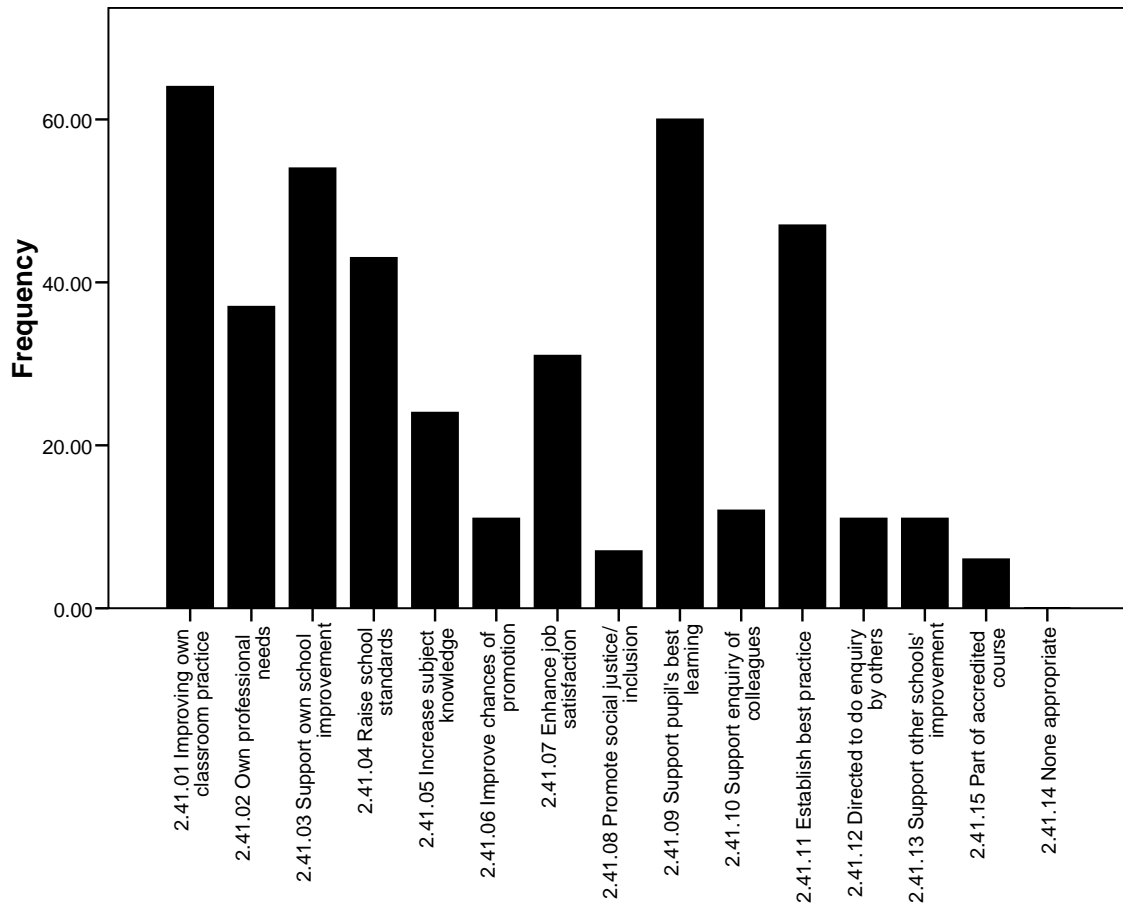
	Frequency	Percent
Class teacher	34	37.8
Subject coordinator/HOD	28	31.1
Pastoral responsibility	11	12.2
Key stage co-ordinator	6	6.7
Deputy headteacher	5	5.6
Headteacher	5	5.6
Learning support teacher	1	1.1
Teaching assistant	0	0.0
Other responsibilities	0	0.0
Total	90	100

**Table 5.1: frequency table for participant responsibilities**

This table supports the range of participants involved in the action research elements of the network suggested in the documentary analysis above. This included the involvement of a group of headteachers (5 of 90 participants), which can be attributed to the evidence from the documentary analysis referring to the creation of the headteachers enquiry group. Of the remainder, the vast majority (84 of 85) were teachers with different levels of responsibility; the only other participant was a learning support teacher. This also concurs with the documentary analysis above which suggested that the enquiry groups, at least during the first two years, were composed of teachers. This questionnaire was administered in the third year of the network, and it would seem that the numbers of teachers who were active enquirers during the first two years had grown in the third. Whilst the documentary analysis suggested that a total of 72 teachers had been involved in enquiry activities in the first two years; this questionnaire suggests that, during the third year, the number of enquirers had grown to 90.

### **Motivations for involvement in networked inquiry**

This questionnaire asked participants to identify factors influencing their decision to become involved in action research. Responses were coded in SPSS as binary items and the number of participants who selected a particular issue is shown in Figure 5.1. No participant felt that none of the options provided were appropriate and so the range of motivational issues provided seemed to accord with participants' own experiences.



**Figure 5.1: frequency of reasons for becoming involved in networked inquiry<sup>13</sup>**

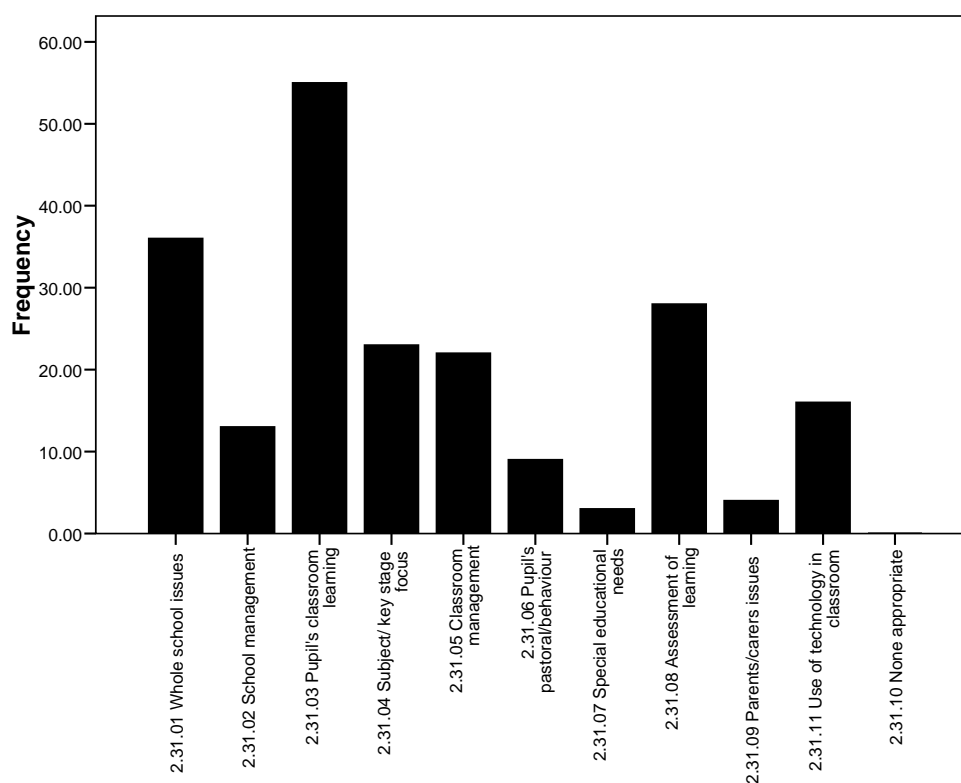
Network 2 was intended to further improve student test scores, initially through identifying and removing barriers to learning. This is consistent with the responses shown in Figure 5.1 indicating that participants were most interested in improving their own classroom practice (64 of 90 participants) and schools (54 of 90 participants), and in supporting student learning (60 of 90 participants). There were also relatively high responses to the related issues of raising school standards (43 of 90) and establishing best practice (47 of 90). Together, these factors suggest a network very much concerned with improving and developing practices, a consistent feature with the documentary analysis which related aspirations to recent performance in accountability measures. Compulsion also seems to have been a factor in some involvement in the enquiry aspects of the network as 11 of 90 participants had been instructed to become involved. Collaboration seemed less important as relatively few

<sup>13</sup> N.B. as this was multiple choice participants could pick as many as matched their own experience, the bars in figure 5.1 shows the number of occasions that participants picked an individual response.

participants identified supporting colleagues (12 of 90) or other schools (11 of 90) as significant aspects in their motivation for becoming involved in the network.

### Selection of action research topics

The topics addressed by participants in their action research were explored through a multiple choice question. Again, participants could select as many responses as they felt were appropriate for their own situation and each separate response to this question was coded as a separate item on SPSS. The options provided seemed a suitable selection as no participants chose the response indicating that none of the options provided were appropriate for them. The responses to this question are shown in Figure 5.2:



**Figure 5.2: frequency of responses for topic of enquiry**

Pupils' classroom learning was selected as the most significant issue, being chosen by 55 of 90 participants. Whole school issues were the second most common, being selected by 36 of 90 participants, while other responses varied. These two issues, taken together, support the view of this network as being concerned with the improvement of member schools through achieving improvements in classroom

practices. However, the range of these topics also suggests that the overall foci were fairly broad and had been interpreted in a number of ways by participants.

## Collaboration and networked action research

The questionnaire also explored some of the ways in which network members had worked together. This was achieved in a number of ways, through questions exploring who enquirers had worked with, what they had worked with partners on, and exploring with whom they had shared their work. Each of these is dealt with in turn below.

### *Who support had been received from*

This question adopted a similar format to those discussed above as there were 10 possible responses and participants could choose as many as matched their own situation. The responses to this question are shown in Figure 5.3. The categories offered seemed to have relevance to participants as no one returned a response that they had received support, but not from the choices available.

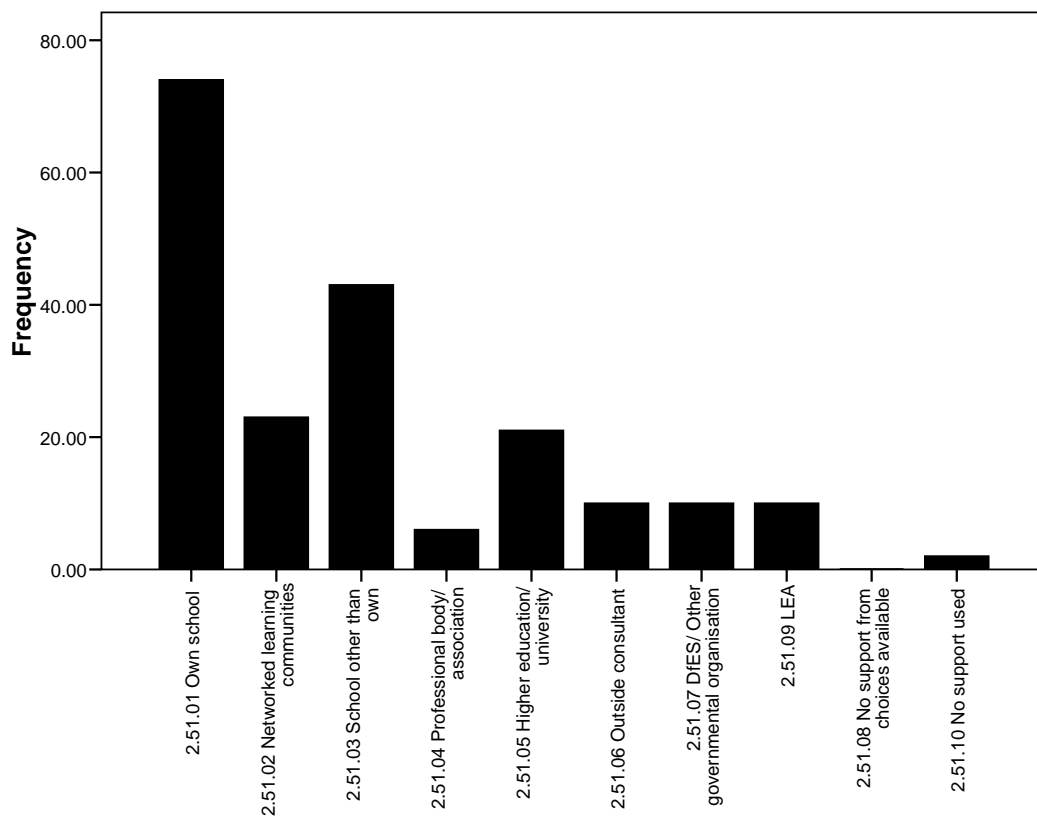


Figure 5.3: frequency of responses for support received on enquiry

Figure 5.3 suggests that the majority of support was received from within school (74 chose this option). However, it should be noted that 16 participants had not received any support from their own school, and two had received no support for their enquiry at all. Just under a half had received some support from other schools (43 participants). Theoretically, this means that all 90 participants could have received support from colleagues, either in their own school or from colleagues in another school in the network. However, cross-tabulating these two possible responses suggests otherwise, as shown in Table 5.2:

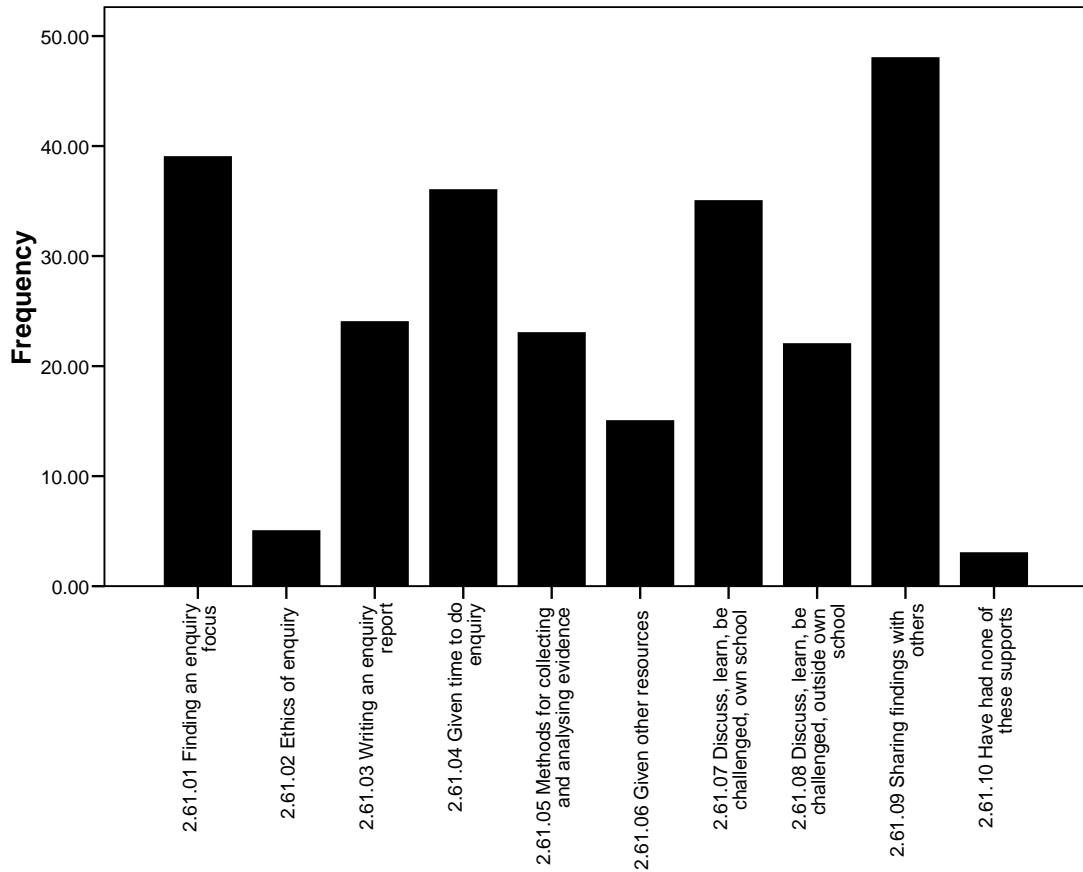
		School other than own		Total
		no	yes	
Own school	No	12	4	16
	Yes	35	39	74
Total		47	43	90

**Table 5.2: cross tabulation of support received from own school and other school**

Table 5.2 suggests that, of the 16 participants who had not received support from their own school, only 4 had received support from other schools. However, just over 50% of participants who had received support from their own school had also received support from other schools (39 of 74 responses). The patterns of support in this network was, therefore, varied, as whilst enquirers in this network were predominantly supported within and between member schools, twelve participants had received no support from either their own or other schools, 10 of whom had received support from elsewhere (two having received no support at all).

***Aspects of enquiry that had been supported***

In addition to exploring who had supported the work of these enquirers, this questionnaire also explored what aspects of their enquiry had been supported. The areas of support that had been received by participants are shown in Figure 5.4 below.



**Figure 5.4: aspects of enquiry that had been supported**

As established above, two participants had received no support and so selected the final option. This was also true, however, for one other participant who clearly felt that they had received support, but not in aspects of their work described by the other options.

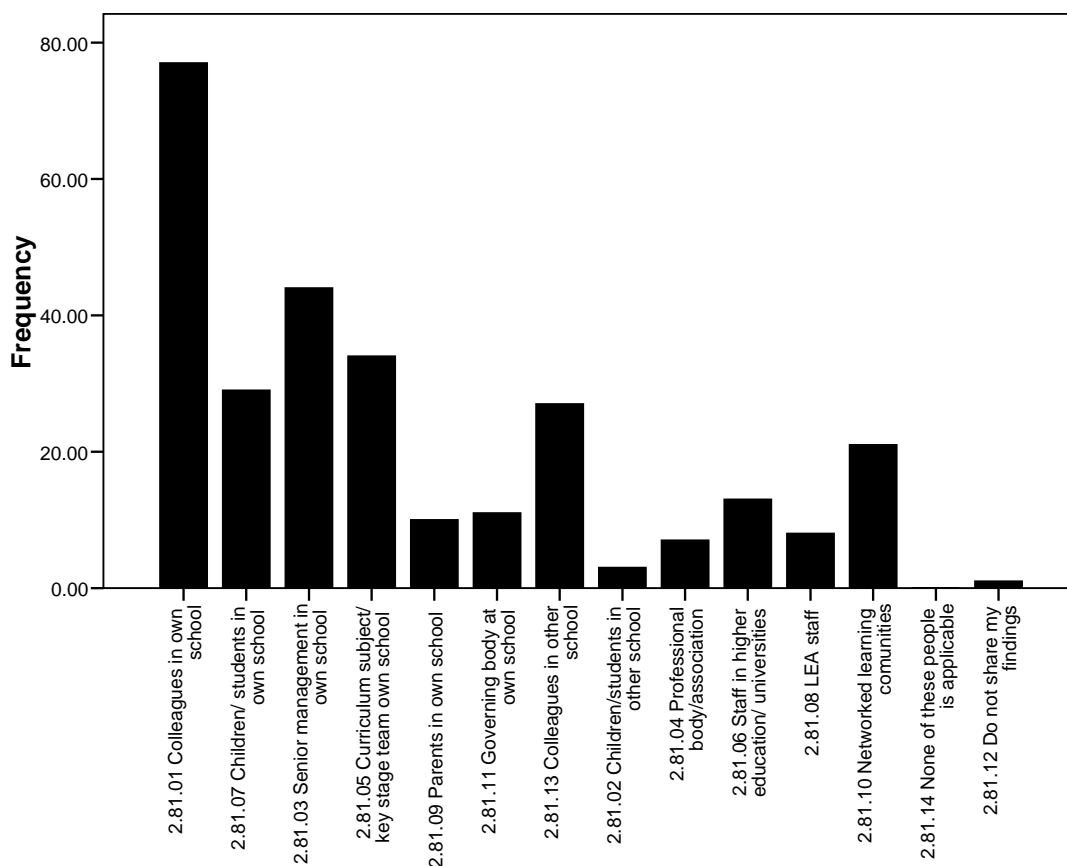
Responses to this question indicate that sharing the findings of enquiry was the most common form of support that had been received. This suggests that the aspirations of the network, noted in the documentary analysis, to provide opportunities for sharing work through seminars, conferences and written reports, had been used by more than 50% of the participants and, whilst support seemed to have been spread across most other aspects, there was little support for ethics of enquiry. This also suggests that the aspirations of the network to encourage dialogue across the community of practitioners in member schools had been achieved in a variety of ways.

### *Sharing enquiry work*

The aspirations of Network 2 had been to create an enquiry process based around dialogue between professionals (and especially teachers) across member schools. They aspired to conduct and share enquiries through a number of mechanisms, including seminars, conferences and reports. Participants were asked with whom they had shared the process and outcomes of their enquiry. The results of this question are shown in Figure 5.5.

No participants felt that the response options did not match their own case, and it is interesting to note that only one participant had not shared their enquiry work with anyone. This implies that at least one of the individuals who had not received support for their work had, at least, shared what they had done with others. In keeping with the analysis above, sharing with other staff from the participant's own school is considerably more common than other responses. Indeed sharing work within school is far more common than sharing between them, as the next two most common responses are also from within the participants' own school, i.e. sharing with the Senior Management Team or immediate subject or year teams. The fourth most common response, of sharing with staff from other schools, an aspiration of the network, was selected by 27 participants, 50 fewer than sharing within their own school.





**Figure 5.5: frequency responses for sharing the conduct and outcomes of enquiry**

This also suggests that, whilst there was more collaboration within schools than across schools, the picture was mixed and the dialogue, suggested as an aspiration of the network in the documentary analysis, had involved a wide variety of participants, albeit with more emphasis on within-school dialogue. Students, parents and governors all have a low response rate in this question, reinforcing the view that Network 2 was principally a teacher centred enquiry network. The nature of this network, and the ways in which enquiries operated, was further explored in interviews conducted with a range of participants. The analysis of these interviews is outlined in the following section.

### ***Analysis of interviews***

The interviews conducted for this case study were negotiated with the co-leaders of the network who, in turn, approached network members to enquire about their willingness to participate in this phase of the research. Ten members of Network 2 from seven different schools volunteered to participate in the interview stage of the

research. Unfortunately, no headteachers volunteered for the interview stage of research and neither co-leader agreed to be interviewed. All interview participants were, therefore, teacher members of the enquiry groups described in the documentary analysis above. The following sections of this chapter explore the main themes that emerged from interviews in this network.

## **The design and operation of Network 2**

The introduction to the network and annual review, examined in the documentary analysis above, both stated that one of the aims of the network was to initiate dialogue between colleagues within and across schools in the network. The development of these opportunities for dialogue, and their relationship to the operation and participation in and through the network, are explored through three main themes below. The first of these explores the process of negotiating network participation.

### ***Negotiating network membership***

Network 2 was a large network involving 13 schools. Involvement of these individual schools was negotiated, prior to the application to the NCSL, by the team who eventually became co-leaders of the network emphasising the suggestion from the documentary analysis that this network had not existed prior to becoming part of the Networked Learning Communities programme. Membership negotiations were conducted with the senior management teams of potential participant schools.

How it came across was, we had a senior management meeting. One of the organisers came to the meeting and said, ‘Will you do it?’ We said, we will, as long as it doesn’t take a lot of extra time, because we’re all really busy and have other commitments because we’re all on the management team. (Network 2 Participant 9)

Whilst the school of which Participant 9 was a deputy headteacher chose to participate, this decision to become a part of the network was made on the basis that this would not require a large commitment of time in a context where people were already feeling overworked. Having been successful in gaining funding, the network then started to recruit individuals for the enquiry groups mentioned in the documentary analysis. The personal decision to take part in the network was related,

by some participants, with a feeling that this involvement was not associated with accountability measures.

When you're working day to day the pressure is immense [with] things you've been told you've got to, it's really prescriptive. But this wasn't, you felt you could get your teeth into it more, because no one was saying, you've got to go this way, you've got to do this, I want an A4 sheet of this, and this is the evaluation. (Network 2 Participant 7)

Despite the accountability measures associated with the national programme of the Networked Learning Communities (such as the annual review), the network was still seen as being significantly different from externally imposed practices associated with measures of quality and accountability by bodies such as OfSTED and the DCSF. This was described by another participant as giving them freedom.

[Being a part of the network] gives you the freedom, the direction you want to be going with this enquiry. I suppose a big thing for me in personal terms was just the learning I was able to go through as a new teacher. It gave me time out of school. I suppose all my influences have been within two schools... and it was just good to get out to other schools. [Before the network] I didn't feel like you could easily visit them because of workload, just the pressures of time, there was so much to do, you know what I mean? And [being part of the network] gave me access to other schools so I could learn from them, in that sense. (Network 2 Participant 10)

The freedom provided by the network was associated with the opportunity to visit, work with and learn from colleagues in other schools, opportunities which, in the normal course of events, were not believed to have been available. These quotes suggest that the aspirations to support dialogue were based on the experiences and perceptions of practitioners and were shared by individual participants in the network. These opportunities for dialogue were intended to be supported through a series of network events explored in the following section.

### *Network processes*

Another feature of the network highlighted by the documentary analysis was the system of meetings, and conferences, which were intended to bring groups of enquirers together, and give a chance for the wider staff membership of the network (i.e. personnel in schools not actively involved as members of enquiry groups) to engage with these enquirers and with other staff across the network. These, and the

importance of the reporting and writing processes, were also commented upon by interview participants.

The conferences have been good and we've got a lot out of it, doing the displays, doing the write up, probably have got quite a bit out without even realising it. But the smaller ones where it is mostly internal, we have also benefited from, and it's the opportunity to meet up, formalise it, crystallize that thought perhaps towards putting it down. (Network 2 Participant 1)

Participant 1, therefore, sees some benefit from the systems of meetings and conferences around which the network, and the enquiry groups, were structured. Others, however, are more sceptical. Participant 5, for example, saw much more value in enquiry group meetings than in attending conferences which seemed more about delivery and less to do with dialogue.

The more frustrating bit is the days when the organisers think that they will get everyone together, it is important to meet with the other groups I'm not denying that but you go to these days... [and] never at any point have we ever had time to go through it with your enquiry group. It just never materialised. That doesn't work at all. (Network 2 Participant 5)

The weakness of these conferences, in the eyes of Participant 5, was that they did not provide sufficient time for enquiry groups to meet. However, whilst the time for discussion within groups seems limited, these events were believed, by others, to provide a stimulus for change.

You know, it was only when we got a letter saying, you're going to meet as a group, that you think, oh right, we'd better do something. You know, if we'd have known, we would have laid out timetable of dates, including the communal things when we all meet as a conference or whatever. And you know, [we were told] you need to meet as a group once this term... It's trying to get everybody's diaries together. It's impossible. (Network 2 Participant 9)

It seems from this quote, however, that whilst the network wide conferences were regularly planned, the smaller group meetings were less regular, and that the opportunity to provide stimulus for change that could have been achieved through planning regular enquiry group meetings did not materialise because of the challenges of negotiating times in congested diaries. This was also reflected upon by Participant 2 who had also failed to engage with such a process. In this case the failure to engage with the process is attributed to their being the only enquirer in their school.

Yes the fact that the idea of networking obviously used to work with other schools but because I was on my own in one particular school there was nobody to drive me and I wasn't there to drive somebody else to say right we've got to do this, we've got to meet this deadline, we need to set a meeting. (Network 2 Participant 2)

It would appear, therefore, that whilst some enquirers have gained the benefit intended from the system of meetings and conferences planned and outlined in the documentary analysis, the experience of others has been more mixed, both in terms of the regularity of such meetings and the benefits gained from them. Participants also viewed the benefits, or otherwise, of these systems differently, with some having found benefit from all aspects of the process, others seemed less convinced. This reflects a diversity of experience and perception which is also evident in some of the different aspects of enquiry groups, explored in the following section.

### *The formation of enquiry groups*

Network 2 set up a number of groups of practitioners who collaborate together on an enquiry. These were originally termed 'study groups' and they brought together groups of staff to address a particular focus. These groups included representatives from a number of schools.

We class ourselves as a study group, [that was] the term that was used originally, there were six of us... [from] three or four different school. (Network 2 Participant 1)

However, the formation and operation of these groups has not always been successful. Participant 2 highlighted one occasion where an enquiry group had folded, this they attributed to a number of causes as follows:

Well I'm one of the groups that's folded... quite a few [groups] had folded and people had not worked well together. One of our problems at the beginning was we felt we were thrown together as a group we didn't choose each other, we were just spread out as names and put together... [for example] there were two people from one school and... they had an inspection and... stopped coming back. ... [Then] there was a meeting at the [venue] and I was the only one representing our group. One member was on maternity leave, which she couldn't help, another lady was on a one year contract and her husband went back to Scotland. She went with him which leaves yours truly. (Network 2 Participant 2)

The problems encountered by Participant 2 were not shared by all groups. Whilst other groups had also been put together, they overcame this unfamiliarity with each other by engaging in a period of dialogue and sharing of experiences and aspirations. This was enhanced through visits to the schools of other members of the group.

We were put together as a group. Ours was a big group but nobody dropped out. We saw how there were other nebulous enquiries and decided that we weren't really going to get anywhere with that approach. As a group sat down and talked about what we were going to do, and everyone did actually get on very well together... We went to visit other schools... [and] saw where their... problems were... you can see them, talk about them [and] can discuss how to deal with them. (Network 2 Participant 4)

Participant 4 contrasts the successful experiences that they had in the establishment and organisation of the group with other groups who had been organised around 'nebulous enquiry' foci. In their group, the establishment of an enquiry focus went hand in hand with the social development of the group, all of which was based around a sharing of personal interests, concerns and potential solutions, rather than forming the group around a predetermined topic. Other participants also reflected on this establishment of enquiry groups, suggesting that they are most beneficial when they include colleagues from the same school.

I think it would have been more helpful if we could have been deliberately put in to groups with somebody in our school. I was lucky as there were two of us [in my group]. That did help because we could then discuss it when we were back at school and it moved things on a bit. (Network 2 Participant 9)

This relates to an earlier quote where participant 2 noted that, because of the collapse of their enquiry group, and the fact that they were not working with a colleague from their own school, they lacked opportunities for dialogue or the stimulus associated with being part of a group and so their individual enquiry suffered as a result.

Network 2 seems to have deliberately established cross-school enquiry groups. The intention in doing so would appear to have been to enhance networking between those individuals and the schools of which they were a part. This seemed to have been realised where groups initiated their work through sharing and dialogue and not with strongly fixed preconceived ideas topics. However these cross-school groups faced the challenge of spreading enquiry across organisations with difficulties in finding time for face to face meetings with people who did not work closely together and had

not already established a working relationship with each other. This provided a challenge to some enquirers who lacked the close contact with a colleague from their own school losing the benefit of both the more sustained and detailed dialogue possible with a colleague who one sees regularly in the normal course of their work, and the stimulus that would be associated with such regular contact.

This cross school aspiration seems to have been less effective in supporting individual enquirers than their existing within-school network of relationships. As noted in the analysis of questionnaires, enquirers, despite being members of cross school groups, had gained more support from colleagues in their own school. This issue, of bringing together disparate groups of enquirers, is also addressed in the foci that these enquiry groups established, an issue explored below.

### *Establishing foci for enquiry*

The topics for enquiry were first established through a consultative process. Staff across the network were asked, via a questionnaire, what issues they thought should be addressed. Enquiry groups were then formed around these topics, although it seems that these groups and the issues they addressed evolved and so departed from the initial topic around which the group was initially formed.

We [initially] had a questionnaire to explore the areas [what interested] people and they were the topics that people chose for the groups. But what they came together initially to do developed into something else and I can't even remember what ours was initially. (Network 2 Participant 1)

An alternative to starting with topics derived from this consultation was adopted by other groups who established their interests through dialogue. This has enabled the group to interrogate their own interests and decide on a shared focus, despite the diversity of responsibilities of group members.

I can't remember what topic people were given but we decided that we [would] meet as a group first and foremost and decide what we wanted to do. We sat as a group and talked about things that we were interested in, in the school and things that we thought children found difficult, things they found easy... We thought transition, within school transition, would be a good thing to look at. We were a real mixture... [with members from] nursery, reception, year 2, year 3 and somebody who didn't have a classroom [but] we wanted something that was going to be used for everybody. (Network 2 Participant 5)

This elaborated on by Participant 5 who goes on to suggest that the formation of a group with very fixed ideas and foci fails to make the most of the collaborative potential of networked enquiry and that an approach based around dialogue establishes a topic for enquiry which is ‘tight’ and of shared interest.

When we first said what we were thinking of doing one of the leaders arrived [and thought] there a problem... we said no there’s not problem... [but] we haven’t got weeks or months of time to spend, in the limited time we’ve got, this is what we can do, we think we can look at this topic and that will mean that children are functioning better and more quickly in their next class, I mean, that was the whole point of it really. (Network 2 Participant 5)

In addition to establishing a ‘tight focus’, the choice of a topic for enquiry groups to tackle was also related to perceived needs at participant schools. Thus the success of the enquiry was judged on the effect that it had in participants’ own schools.

Yeah, and I think for us as teachers, the outcome has got to be connected with an impact on the children you teach or the school... That’s partly why myself and the other teacher in my school left, we decided, and all of us in our school actually, in different groups, we decided it wasn’t worth continuing, because it wasn’t having any impact back at school. And we couldn’t justify the time out. (Network 2 Participant 9)

Participant 9, and all staff in their school, left their enquiry groups, because of the perceived lack of impact on their own institution. It would appear, therefore, that judgements of the effect of the network were made at the level of participating schools. An additional tension, then, facing these enquirers was in bridging between the differing agendas of participant schools through these cross-school enquiry groups. As well as describing their experiences of the operation and nature of the network these participants also discussed issues which related to the thematic aspects of participatory interventions. These are explored in the following section.

## **Participatory interventions and the nature of Network 2**

Interview participants were asked about the nature and operation of the network of which they were a part, and also about some of the issues around networking more generally. In Network 2, participants identified a number of issues which are discussed here as three themes, the first of which explores issues around the development of dialogue through these network processes.



### *Developing dialogue amongst practitioners*

The aspiration of the network, outlined in the documentary analysis, was to reinvigorate a process of improvement that had recently stalled across schools in the region, by stimulating dialogue. The development of this dialogue was meant to be achieved through a number of strategies, including conferences and seminars, but principally through the enquiry groups. This was an issue directly addressed by a number of participants, such as Participant 1, who highlights just this point in explaining why they became interested in participating in enquiry.

When it was set up originally I think one the things that I did is that I said that I was interested in being part of it, and I asked him [the co-leader], the way he put it was that if you go on a course, you know, we all go on courses, and then when we come back we would share what we learnt, it's like 'I told so and so and what a fantastic idea'. (Network 2 Participant 1)

Participant 1 outlines the view of one of the co-leaders who equates the collaboration aspirations of the network with the experience of attending courses and sharing the excitement that generates with colleagues. This participant then went on to describe the actuality of being a member of the network:

And that seemed to happen so often that the way they [the network co-leaders] organised it was this is an opportunity to have that bit without the course, you know, the chance to talk to other people, develop ideas, bounce ideas off each other, pinch ideas off each other whatever, you know, as teachers do... I think it is just natural, we're all keen to talk about what interests us so I think that really sort of courted peoples imagination, it gives the opportunity to do that... in some ways that's happening and in some ways it hasn't. I don't think it's been as relaxed as people thought it could be. (Network 2 Participant 1)

This suggests that the aspired dialogue that was articulated by the co-leader has materialised, at least in the experience of Participant 1, although the structures and setting for that dialogue have not been as effective as they could have been, in particular suggesting that the relaxed start to the network was not sustained. This issue of dialogue was also highlighted by other teachers who identified this as being the principal benefit of the network and their involvement in the enquiry groups.

On the enquiry I would say the best for teachers was finding out what goes on in the other schools, how they address problems, they have similar problems but they are different way of looking at it. That's the thing. It's just a different way of looking at it... People looking at it and saying [to each other]

why don't you do this? Then they're thinking oh yeah we could do it exactly like that, but we could try just a bit of that [approach]. It's working with the other teachers, you're really getting to know them and having the freedom to be able to say what you want. You build up a relationship with them and the confidence with them and you get to know that when they are talking what they have actually got in their minds. They are not secretive about things, they are actually talking genuinely about their thoughts. (Network 2 Participant 4)

It seems, in the views of some enquirers, that dialogue with colleagues in enquiry groupings, underpinned by a common focus, actually constitutes not only the aspiration of the group but also a part of the process of enquiry. This was also related to the formation of these enquiry groups as collaborative 'teams' of enquirers. These teams were believed to provide the basis by which people could re-examine their motivations for teaching.

Again, working together as a team [is] the inspiration. You have the ideas and you know you want to do it but you get caught up in the everyday job. [Enquiry] lets you see the children and see what you're supposed to be doing, instead of wiping their bottoms and their noses, you're looking at the real reason why you chose to do it in the first place, and how you can make a difference, it's a good feeling. You don't get that feeling very often do you? You get squashed into the job. Because you don't do it once and then forget about it, you need that to keep you going. (Network 2 Participant 8)

These teams of enquirers were seen, therefore, as providing the opportunity to escape the immediate pressures of the workplace and to provide the opportunity for participants to reflect on their own principled view of teaching and identify the ways in which this could be enacted. This was seen as being inherently motivating in itself.

### ***Rigour, research and enquiry***

A second factor highlighted by participants was the difference they perceived between academic research and practitioner enquiry. Establishing a shared focus with a clear link to practice had been identified as being a significant factor in the success of these enquiry groups. This practical dimension of enquiry, however, was not only attributed, by Participant 4, as being one of the reasons for the success of their group, but was also an approach which contrasted with which was purely 'research'.

Sometimes it's a bit difficult to focus on what you have to do next without, you know, it being totally within our hands... But I think we've probably chosen something that we actually get our teeth into, things that we could do rather than just things that we've been talking about or rather than just the

research that we could look at like a couple of people did. It's the choice of enquiry I think that made it a very durable thing. (Network 2 Participant 4)

Participant 4 contrasts their enquiry approach as being practical, with an alternative approach concerned only with 'research' and hence divorced from practice. A second distinction between enquiry and research was discussed by Participant 5, who associated 'research' with reading, and described it as being 'heavy', in contrast with the 'limited' enquiry approach.

[Enquiry] was very limited and I think that was one of the things we liked about it, it was never going to be lots of reading and heavy research project kind of thing. It was always going to be based in the classroom from our own experience. (Network 2 Participant 5)

This view of enquiry being more limited (or focussed) than 'heavy' research was not a view shared by other participants. To Participant 6, for example, the term enquiry is associated with an unstructured exploration, which is less beneficial than a more systematic research informed approach.

Well I would, to me the word 'enquiry' is a bit more of a blanket statement than they're asking you to do. It's a bit more, well I'll just look into that and I'll maybe have a little chat about that. Whereas the reality is, that's not really what you want to do. You actually want... to find some useful ideas that would help us with children who were non-writers, you know, so it was specific and at the end of the day had an impact for all of our classrooms ... She could have given us the skills to actually interview the children, to find out the information that we wanted from the children, because we wanted [research which] wasn't flawed, a genuine piece of research. (Network 2 Participant 6)

The research informed approach of this group was believed to support the development of understanding which enquiry group members could implement with more certainty than a less formalised 'enquiry' approach. This also provides some indication of the nature of support which would be needed for a more systematic approach, which could be viewed as a form of process consultancy. This was also reflected upon by Participant 9 who characterised the different approaches to research, i.e. enquiry and research, as being using and producing publications.

Well I think it means when the end result is some sort of paper is produced and you need to do some sort of research back in your own school. That's what I mean by [research] rather than just reading round. I suppose enquiry to me is you go off on a path and you read around, you try and find out. To me,

the academic research side of it is you then need to produce something for others to read, it has to be polished, the research methods have to be right, the sources have to be acknowledge, all of that stuff. That's what people don't have time to do. (Network 2 Participant 9)

Although the diversity of comments above does seem to suggest that there are differences between enquiry and research, this was not perceived in the same way by all participants. However, the perceived difference between the two does seem to have been a common concern. The main issues that seemed to emerge were between the rigour and hence reliability of research, and the practical, and hence more beneficial, basis of enquiry.

### *Sanction, support and advocate: the role of leadership in enquiry groups*

Although there has been some representation from senior teachers (as in the deputy headteacher mentioned by Participant 1 above), the membership of enquiry groups has not included headteachers.

So at least we've been active and when we wrote up our work and shared them with the headteacher so she's been informed but it's a shame she's not more actively involved... Because it's really good to have headteachers involved, they can make sure that you have time to do your study and that you get the support you need. (Network 2 Participant 1)

The support of headteachers for enquiry group members from their own schools was thought to be a significant factor in the success of the group as a whole and in the success of the individual enquirers from their school. Leadership also exhibits itself in other ways in these enquiry groups. Indeed one of the reasons attributed to the failure of their enquiry group was the lack of leadership from within the group.

And we were leaderless because none of us wanted to take on the leadership so we used to meet together and none us like I say wanted to lead, you know, there was no natural leader in our group so that was one of our big problems. (Network 2 Participant 2)

Thus, whilst the operation of this enquiry network relates to the appointed leadership of schools, it also establishes structures and processes which require leadership of themselves, beyond the advocacy of appointed leaders. A third aspect of leadership was identified by Participant 1, who outlined the facilitatory role adopted by network leaders.

But the leaders were there at [enquiry group meetings] and each group has a head facilitator and ours was [name]. She's been really good, she's been very helpful and supportive. (Network 2 Participant 1)

Thus the issue of leadership had three dimensions, the first being the sanction required from school leaders to staff in their institutions to participate in this enquiry work and the support that they could provide within institutions to help that process happen. The second referred to the leadership that was required of the enquiry groups themselves and the third to the facilitator role of network leaders in supporting the development of these enquiry groups and their work.

### ***Issues arising from this case***

This case study provides a picture of a network established with aspirations relating to regional performance against nationally reported measures, with an intention to continue improvement through a process of bottom-up change based around dialogue. This could create a contradiction between change derived from an external source (the measures of school improvement) and change derived from participant interests. Enquiry groups varied in their organisation and processes. Those which had adopted a fixed topic for their work seemed more likely to fail, whilst others, which had focussed on the social development of the group, before deciding on a focus for their work, succeeded. This seems to establish a potential tension between the aspirations for change which are meant to arise from individual experience and the collective nature of enquiry groups and the network as a whole. A similar tension could be identified between change, which is derived from performance measures, expectations and pressures to improve, and the individual experiences of network members. From this case study, a number of issues are identified and summarised below.

### **The formation of collaborative structures**

Cross-school collaborative enquiry groups were brought together around a number of topics with, it would seem, varied success. Participants emphasised the importance of having someone within their own school to share in the development of their own enquiries (for example participants 9 and 2 above). Questionnaire responses suggested that this within-school collaboration was common, with participants reporting having collaborated with colleagues within their own school more

frequently than with colleagues from outside of their schools, despite the cross school aspirations of the network (see Figure 5.3 above). This suggests that, whilst this was not an intentional strategy of this network, building on existing support networks of enquirers provided a firm foundation for that enquiry, the process through which dialogue can inform enquiry and the medium through which the outcomes are shared. Extending this argument further, a failure to embed these groups in the existing social networks of participants leaves them more vulnerable, for example in the case of Participant 2, where the group folded.

A second feature of building on existing structures and processes can be seen in the experience of Participant 9. In this case, the school decided to withdraw from the enquiry group and network as a whole because of a perception that the network and the enquiry group were not delivering the changes that the school required in order to justify their continuing participation. Thus, in addition to providing a strong basis for networked enquiry by building on existing support networks, the quality and effectiveness of the network itself is judged at the level of individual participants.

### **Which comes first, community or enquiry?**

As established in the documentary analysis, Network 2 was based upon an aspiration to stimulate dialogue between staff in member schools with the intention of reinvigorating the recently slowed rate of improvement. The network was originally founded around one focus, identifying and removing barriers to learning and then identifying best practice, although the focus was interpreted fairly broadly. The formation of enquiry groups, and the decision of the work that they would conduct, seemed to have two main approaches. In the first instance, groups of individuals were brought together with a predefined topic (relating to either of the two main foci) to address. Participant 1 suggested that this formation of groups around specific topics seemed to have been the initial intention of the network. A second approach to group formation was described by Participant 4. In this case, the group of enquirers came together without a very clear pre-established topic, but with a commitment to engaging in dialogue and to conducting visits which would help them understand and appreciate each other's working contexts and aspirations for change. These alternative approaches were also associated, by participants, with the differing success

of the groups and raises a question of the best way of bringing together groups of participants from different institutions, with differing aspirations and without already established working relationships. It is interesting to note, for example, that regardless of the aspirations for the network to establish cross-school groups, participants seemed to have discussed or collaborated much more with colleagues from their own schools than from other schools (see Figure 5.3 and Figure 5.5).

Relationships within schools, therefore, can provide an existing network of support for participating teachers, but they also provide the basis upon which judgements of further collaboration through enquiry would be made. As discussed below, this would be consistent with the bottom up aspirations of the network. The question seems to be: how can networks of this nature be developed, around the existing support structures of schools, in ways which make the most of a collaborative cross school network?

### **Bottom up change and the nature of network enquiry**

The overall aspirations of the network were described in the documentary analysis as stimulating a process of change, based around participant ownership (characterised as being ‘bottom up’ change). This marrying of external measures of success with participant ownership was also highlighted in questionnaire responses in which participants identified improving classroom practices and pupil learning as being common features in the aspirations that they held for becoming a part of the network. The network was also keen to act as a medium and stimulus for dialogue between practitioners, an aspiration which was also believed to be beneficial by many interview participants. This seems to create a tension for the network to be able to provide sufficient opportunities for participant ownership over change while retaining a focus on quality mainly externally judged (thus reducing participant ownership).

This issue was further exemplified in explorations of the role of leadership in Network 2. The first refers to the leadership aspects of being an enquiry group member; participants in these enquiry groups are themselves taking on informal leadership positions as their work is intended to influence each other and other members of their own schools. The second relates to the leadership of those enquiry

groups. Whilst being an enquiry group member was intended to have an informal leadership dimension, the groups themselves also seemed to require formal leadership, i.e. people to take responsibility for the organisation and development of the group itself. The final leadership issue concerns the support required by appointed leaders if the enquiry groups were to be a success. This support was interpreted in two senses, firstly by providing the authority for enquirers to conduct their work within institutions, and secondly in cases where appointed leaders supported the actual conduct of enquiry (in doing so adopting a process facilitator role).

### ***Network 2 overview***

Network 2 was a network of primary schools brought together specifically to become a part of the Networked Learning Communities programme. This network was established with the explicit intention of reinvigorating a period of improvement which had recently stagnated. It was believed that the network provided the right stimulus to re-start this improvement, in particular through action research (termed enquiry).

Action research in Network 2 was organised by bringing together enquirers in cross-school groups. The focus addressed by these groups was decided through a consultative questionnaire completed by staff across member schools. These groups seemed to have had mixed success. One group attributed their success to members being willing to negotiate a focus from scratch, ensuring that everyone had their opportunity to contribute to the process, rather than directly adopting the focus identified from the consultation exercise, a process consistent with the overall aspirations of the enquiry features of this network to stimulate dialogue between practitioners from member schools. Other groups were less successful; participants described groups that had failed because of a perceived lack of benefit for individual schools (leading to their withdrawal) and because of a lack of leadership. These raised issues around the process of change, and the order in which it occurs, in particular questioning whether the development of communities through dialogue should precede the conduct of action research.



Other issues drawn from this case study dealt with the formation of collaborative structures and the aspirations of this network to achieve bottom up change through action research (termed enquiry). Together these present a picture of a network which has an overarching improvement agenda, intended to be achieved through enhancing dialogue between practitioners in a series of cross-school action research groups, leading to the potential for bottom up change.

## **Chapter Six: Case Study of Network 3**

### ***Introduction to Network 3***

Network 3 was a cross phase network (6 secondary schools and 1 primary school). The schools forming Network 3 were close together and were served by the same local authority. There was no suggestion in any of the network documentation that these schools had been operating as a network prior to the Networked Learning Communities programme.

### ***Discussion of the documentary analysis***

The nature and operation of Network 3 has been explored through documents derived from a number of sources including:

1. The initial bid made by the network to the National College for school Leadership in 2002.
2. The self assessment review completed in 2003 by Network 3 after the first year of their work.
3. The self assessment review completed in 2004 by Network 3 after the second year of their work.
4. The activity record completed in 2004 as a part of the year two review.
5. A spring enquiry completed by representatives of the National College for School Leadership in 2004.

### **The aspirations of Network 3**

Annually, members of the Networked Learning Group at the National College for School Leadership conducted what was termed a 'spring enquiry'. This involved facilitators from the NCSL visiting and studying networks to help understand whether, and in what ways, they were achieving the strategic aims of the programme as a whole. The second of these, conducted in 2004, provides a useful introduction to the network, as follows:

[Place] Networked Learning Community is based on collaborative research into classroom practice. Research partners work in pairs from each of the six secondary and one primary schools. Each secondary school's research pair includes a science specialist and a foundation subject teacher to ensure that practice is shared and strategies are developed across these curriculum areas. (NCSL spring enquiry, 2004)

This emphasises the importance of action research to this network, indeed the term action research, used by Network 3, contrasts with the previous case studies and their interpretation of this is explored in the following section.

### **The nature of action research in Network 3**

Network 3's particular approach to action research was initially to establish pairs of teachers as collaborative researchers in participant schools. Pairs included one science and one foundation subject teacher (in secondary schools), suggesting a concern with science further evidenced in the application submitted to the Networked Learning Communities.

There is a widespread pattern of underachievement in science. This has been exacerbated by the impact of the recruitment crisis and the turbulence of staff which has resulted. Science teachers, in particular, are now having to take on the training and support of temporary and overseas trained colleagues. (Network 3 bid, 2002)

The initial purpose behind the action research seems to have been to improve the quality of teaching in science, an area identified as being a particular weakness across these schools (resulting from problems of recruitment). At the end of each year of funding, the network submitted a report of its activities to the Networked Learning Communities. The first of these (2003) provides an outline of the activities of these research pairs.

For most partners in this NLC they have gained knowledge of action-research, including presenting the results of their work... Pairs of teachers working together in some schools have learned a great deal from each other about pupil learning, class based research etc. Through seminars there has been some sharing between schools. Learning has not been shared in depth across the NLC. In some schools it is unclear how much collaboration there has been. (Network 3 year 1 review, 2003)

Bearing in mind that this review is written, in part, to secure ongoing funding, the admission that there is doubt about the degree of collaboration in member schools seems surprisingly honest. However, this does emphasise that the initial aspirations of the network, to establish pairs of teachers in member schools, had been achieved and that these pairs had received some support in developing their understanding of action research. This support was provided by a local higher education institution through a series of seminars.

All the researchers involved described the seminars with [HEI] as a significant milestone in their personal development. They referred to the contribution these had made to the development of their skills of observation and action research. They described the impact of the NLC programme mainly in terms of personal development and development of other colleagues. (NCSL spring enquiry, 2004)

The views of this NCSL representative suggest that teachers from Network 3 had benefitted in gaining technical research skills from these seminars. Within the overall aspiration to improve science education, action research projects seemed to have been focussed on issues decided by participating schools and the action researchers themselves. The only broad, network wide focus (through which science education was intended to be enhanced), seemed to have been a general concern with 'developing thinking', as outlined in the following extract from the review of their second year of funding.

The [networked learning community] has spent 2 years building a solid base of Lead Researchers... each school established its own research focus under the umbrella title of 'developing [network name] thinking'... LRs [Lead Researchers] now provide local expertise in both the process of enquiry led research + also their own and the nlc's areas of study (e.g. pupil understanding of types of questions / development of appropriate questions to solve big topics). (Network 3 year 2 review, 2004)

Action researchers are referred to here as being 'lead researchers'. This suggests a transition in their role from research pairs working to develop individual practice, to leading wider action research activity across participating schools, in doing so utilising expertise learnt through the action research projects of the previous two years. Commenting on the previous two years of the network, the spring enquiry report from the NCSL identified a number of benefits from action research aspects of the network.

...evidence provided by teachers from action research has provided material for schools to question their 'curriculum silos'. One head teacher said that she had not envisaged the impact across a whole school and the extent to which it would affect everyone. In that, small, school, *'all the teachers will be action researchers from September'*. The head teacher described the impact of the research programme largely in terms of changing staff attitudes and approaches to teaching. In particular, she referred to the contribution it had made to improving the motivation of the workforce and reducing teacher turnover. (NCSL spring enquiry, 2004)

This report suggests that action research pairings had an influence beyond developing their own practice identifying two particular outcomes, firstly in changing attitudes to teaching and learning across schools and secondly in spreading the use of the action research process beyond the original pairings to all teachers, therefore spreading the benefits of this approach beyond the initial concern with science in secondary school members.

## **The organisation of network events**

The spreading of action research outcomes was intended to be partially achieved through a series of planned network events and collaboration strategies. These were outlined in the activity report submitted as a part of the year 2 review by Network 3 in 2004.

- Launch Conferences... for Heads (Summer 2003 and Autumn 2003).
  - Launch Conference for Researchers (Autumn 2003). Half day intensive input on the network as an introduction; introduction to research.
  - Researcher Support & Development Programme 2002 [onwards]... linked to the core focus of our NLC and... School development priorities. Initially run by Co-leaders and then supported by HE partner consultant.
  - Steering Committee Meetings 2002 [onwards] termly – management and leadership of network.
  - Annual Conference –2003. Combined with [Gifted and Talented] Strand Annual Conference to provide a shared platform for our work.
  - Researcher writing group –developing a paper and electronic handbook/resource compiling all the research to date – to inform dissemination in school and across the network and beyond.
- (Network 3 activity record section of the year 2 review, 2004)

In addition to action research seminars, a number of collaborative events were organised including conferences held in conjunction with the local Gifted and Talented network. This list also outlines the management structure of the network which held a series of meetings for a steering committee. It seems that the sharing encouraged between action researchers through the seminar programme, and through the conference, was intended to be enhanced through the production of a written outcome to the action research project in the form of a toolkit. This aspiration to spread the work of the network is also evident in the plans outlined as a part of the year 2 review:

In each school... there will be [a] group of enquiry-led practitioners using a range of strategies to develop and evaluate independent pupil learning. Pupils will be an integral part of this process – through focus groups / through metacognition / through reporting back to teachers on changing classrooms. By 2006, it should be possible to identify:

- a. cohorts of practitioners skilled in using a range of evaluation strategies focusing on pupil work / discussion. These practitioners should be leading learning in their schools – some at whole school / intra school level and some in smaller groups. We anticipate that HTs will have a better understanding of how teacher/ pupil enquiry can be used strategically in schools
- b. cohorts of pupils with enhanced skills; e.g. understanding types of questions they can pose / the way knowledge can be structured and accessed. We anticipate that if reinforced across areas of the curriculum – they will then be able to independently apply these. (Network 3 year 2 review, 2004)

It would appear that the development of the network had been deliberately targeted at members of staff, mainly teachers, through the action research aspects of the network. In its last year of funding the network hoped to extend involvement by: extending involvement of teachers in action research (as noted above some schools aspired to involve all teachers as action researchers); by identifying staff who had a particular competence in evaluating student performance and by using the network as a medium to disseminate knowledge through participating schools. In parallel with aspirations to involve more staff in action research, the network aspired to initiate pupil research groups, providing a more systemic route for participation of pupils in the network.

Overall, the network seemed to be moving from a paired model of action research to establishing action research groups of teachers and pupils. The topic for change had also developed with this annual review, suggesting that the network had adopted a more general focus for action research, one concerned with enhancing the independence of pupils.

The documentary analysis described above suggests that Network 3 had adopted a model of networking based in individual member schools. Cross-school collaboration appears mainly to have been through attendance at common seminar events, including a network conference held in conjunction with the existing Gifted and Talented network, and through the production of a toolkit to be shared with all teachers in

network schools. These, and other issues, were explored in more depth through the questionnaire completed by network personnel. The analysis is outlined below.

### ***Analysis of questionnaires***

This research had been negotiated with co-leaders, who agreed that the network would participate as a whole. These co-leaders then consulted headteachers of member schools who were also happy for this research to proceed although, in the event, neither co-leader nor any headteachers completed questionnaires. Having agreed that the network would participate, the co-leaders, with the support of headteachers, then approached individual action researchers in participant schools to take part.

By request, network co-leaders distributed questionnaires and returned those that had been completed. In the end, 23 participants completed and returned questionnaires, all of whom had been involved in the action research aspects of the network. Because one of the conditions of participation in this research requested by the network was to distribute questionnaires themselves, it was not possible to identify individual schools from these questionnaires.

### **Participant role and responsibility profile**

The questionnaire completed by the participants was conducted in conjunction with research being conducted by a University on behalf of the Networked Learning Communities programme. This questionnaire comprised 38 questions which, when entered into SPSS, produced 249 separate items. The first section of the questionnaire explored the profile of participants, including identifying participant responsibilities. The documentary analysis above indicates that this network mainly comprised teachers taking roles as action researchers and then working together to develop their practice. A review of the responsibilities held by the action researchers who had completed the questionnaire, shown in Table 6.1 below, supports this suggestion with the equal highest response being from class teachers.

	Frequency	Percent
Class teacher	8	34.8
Subject co-ordinator / HOD	8	34.8
Other responsibilities	4	17.4
Teaching assistant	1	4.3
Deputy headteacher	1	4.3
Pastoral responsibility	1	4.3
Headteacher	0	0.0
Key stage co-ordinator	0	0.0
Learning support teacher	0	0.0
Total	23	100

**Table 6.1: frequency table for participant responsibilities**

Network 3 seemed to have encouraged participation from a wider population than class teachers with a high proportion of middle managers and, despite suggestions in the documentary analysis that this was exclusively a teacher network, the group of action researchers also included a teaching assistant. Nevertheless the majority participation was from teachers, or people with some teaching responsibility, which was in keeping with the aspirations of the network to develop teaching practices within network schools.

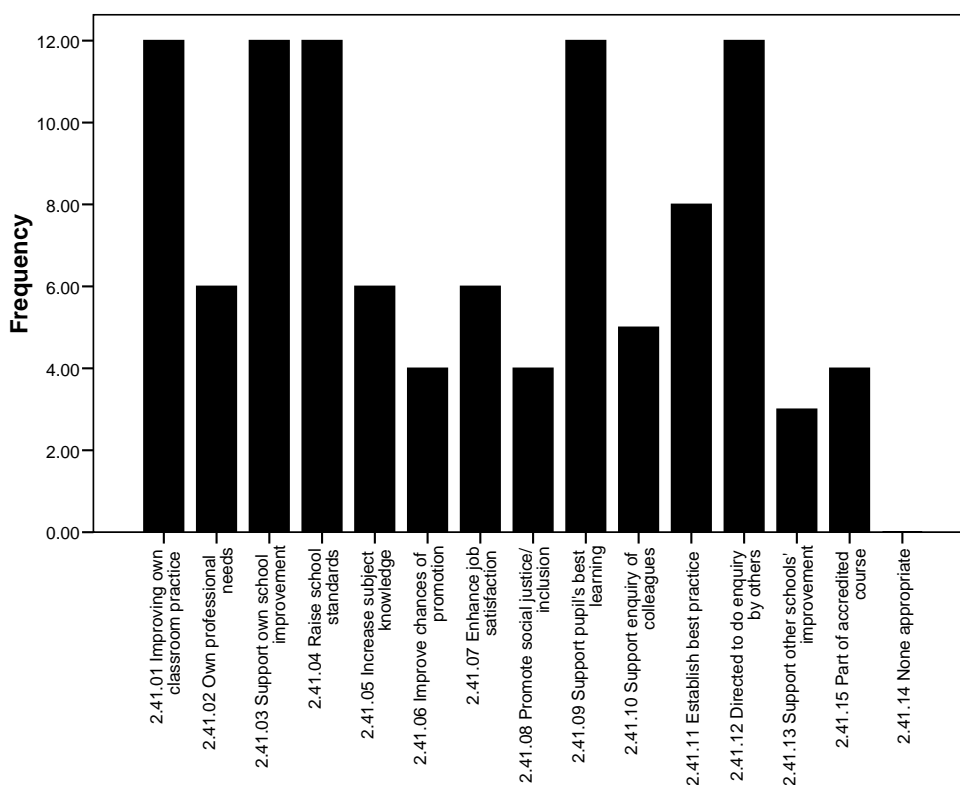
### **Motivations for involvement in networked inquiry**

The motivations of participants for becoming involved in the action research aspects of the network were also explored in the questionnaire. This was examined through a multiple response question which asked participants to select as many listed reasons for becoming involved with action research as matched their own situation. Each possible response was coded as a separate item in SPSS. The responses to this question are shown in Figure 6.1 below. It should be noted that three participants had not given any response to this question, including the option: ‘none appropriate’, and so are treated as missing data. This reduces the total number of participants from 23 to 20. This missing data is the case for all of the following questions.

The initial strategy of the network to intervene in the teaching of science in secondary schools seemed, from the combination of the documentary analysis and the responses of this question, to have had two main effects, firstly related to an improvement agenda, and secondly in relation to the voluntary nature of networking. Participants identified especially strongly with five of the possible responses, each being selected



by 12 of the 20 participants. Of these most popular responses, three are explicitly associated with an improvement agenda: ‘improving own classroom practice’, ‘improving own school’ and to ‘raise school standards’. Whilst these three items are explicitly associated with improvement, participants also identified equally strongly with ‘supporting pupil learning’ which, whilst not mentioning improvement as explicitly, is consistent with the improvement agenda noted above.

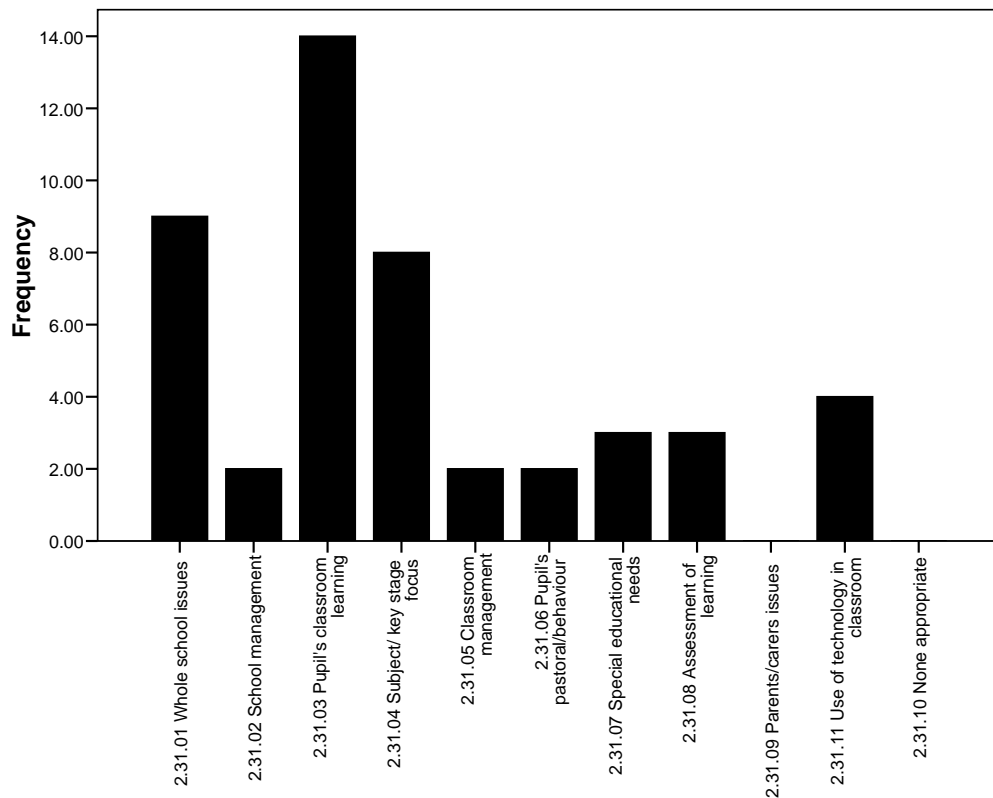


**Figure 6.1: reasons for becoming involved in networked action research**

The aspiration of the network to improve science implies that teachers in science had been directed to take part in the action research aspects of the network. This seems to have been the case as ‘directed to do enquiry by others’ was also one of the most popular responses, being selected by 12 of 20 participants. This suggests a disjunction with some of the voluntary principles of educational networks noted in the review of networking literature and in the aims of the Networked Learning Communities themselves. This question also suggests that the cross-school aspects of this network were of limited interest to participants, as one of the least frequently selected items concerned supporting other schools’ improvement.

## Selection of action research topics

Question 6.2 asked participants to identify the topic for their action research. This question was also multiple choice, providing a list of topics from which they could select as many as matched their own situation. The responses to this item are shown in Figure 6.2 below.



**Figure 6.2: frequency for topic of action research**

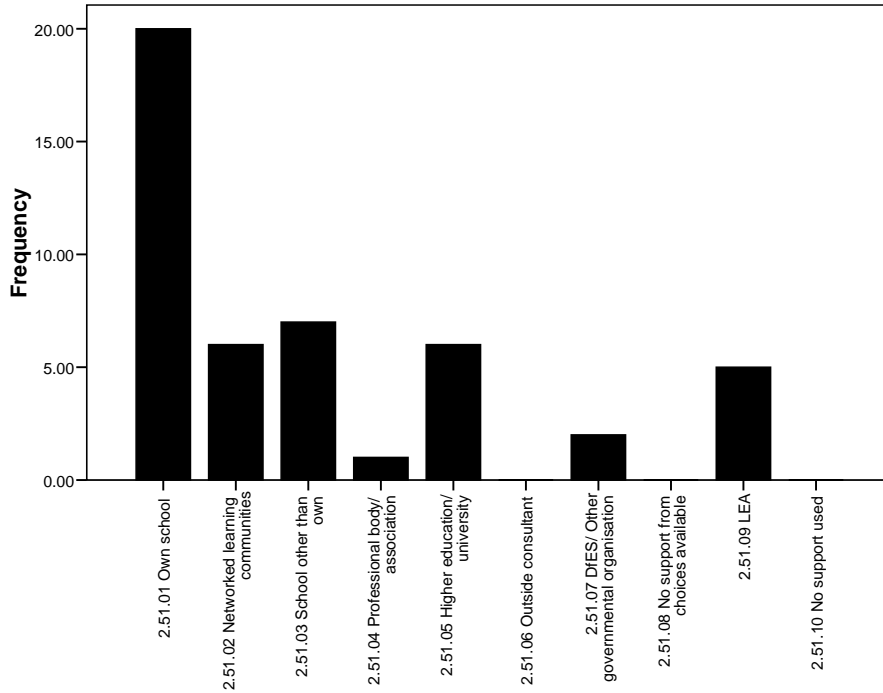
The concern of the network, and of the participants in this research, with improving teaching performance is consistent with the most popular response to this question which identified pupil learning as being the most common topic for action research. The aspirations of the network, to address poor performance in science by establishing pairs of action researchers (of which one was from outside of science), seems to have been less rigorously applied over the life of the network than was originally intended as only eight participants identified a subject specific focus, but this is still a sizeable proportion of these participants (more than 34%).

## **Collaboration and networked action research**

The documentary analysis describes a network, designed around individual pairs of action researchers in member schools, which was intended to be supported through some limited cross-school activities, including shared action research training events, and a network conference held in collaboration with the local gifted and talented teacher network. The questionnaire completed by participants from this network also explored the collaborative aspects of this network. This was achieved in three main ways exploring: who action researchers had received support from, the aspects of action research that had been supported, and the ways in which the outcomes of this work had been shared. These are discussed in turn below.

### ***Who support had been received from***

The documentary analysis suggests that action researchers in member schools were supported by representatives from a local Higher Education Institution and worked in pairs. Later documents suggested that the cohort of initial action researchers would share their experience with colleagues and become action research facilitators themselves. This was explored in the questionnaire, asking participants to identify who had supported their action research. Participants were able to select as many responses from this multiple choice question. The results to this question are shown in Figure 6.3 below.



**Figure 6.3: frequency of responses for support received on action research**

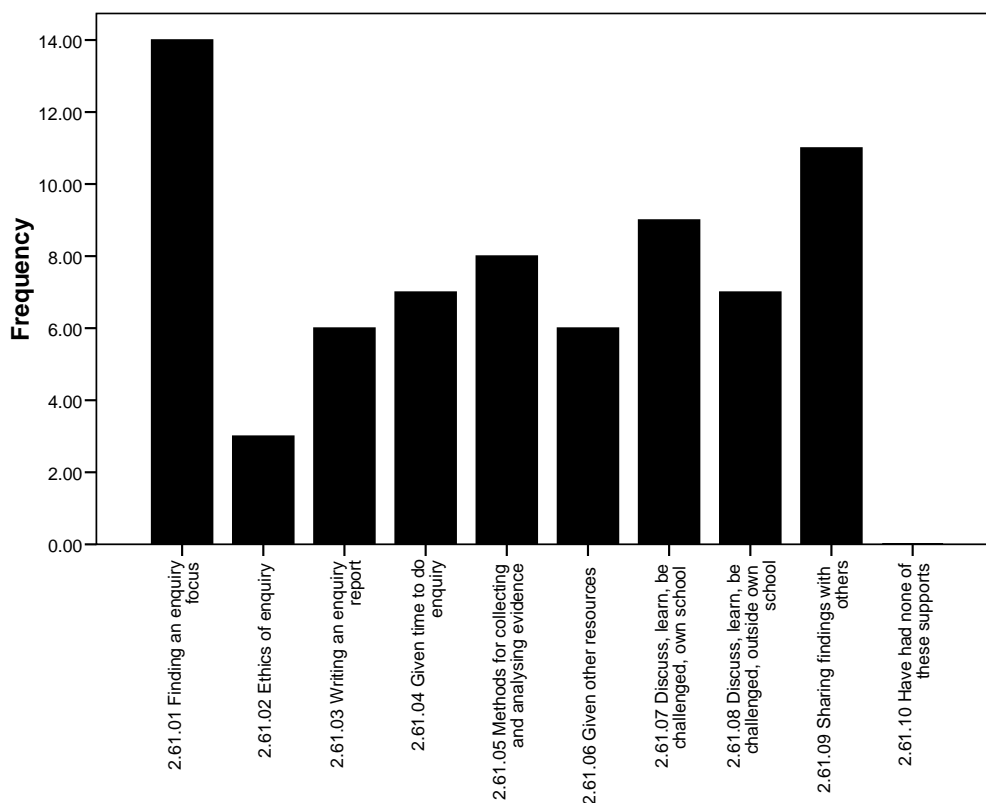
Figure 6.3 shows that the school centred nature of the network, with the pairs of action researchers in member schools, was the feature that provided the most support for the action research conducted by participants, with all 20 suggesting that they had received support from their own school<sup>14</sup>. No participants indicated that they had not received any support or that they had but not from the options available.

Despite the role of university personnel in providing action research seminars, only six participants identified themselves as having received support from an HEI. Slightly higher numbers of participants had reported receiving support from other schools, but this was in addition to the support received from their own school and so suggests that this form of support reflects a development from collaboration within schools to support from colleagues in other institutions within the network.

<sup>14</sup> N.B. as outlined above 3 participants had not completed the question sufficiently and were entered as missing data.

### *Aspects of action research that had been supported*

This questionnaire explored the aspects of action research that had been supported. This was also a multiple choice question in which participants could identify as many responses as they felt appropriate. The frequency with which these items were selected by participants is shown in Figure 6.4.



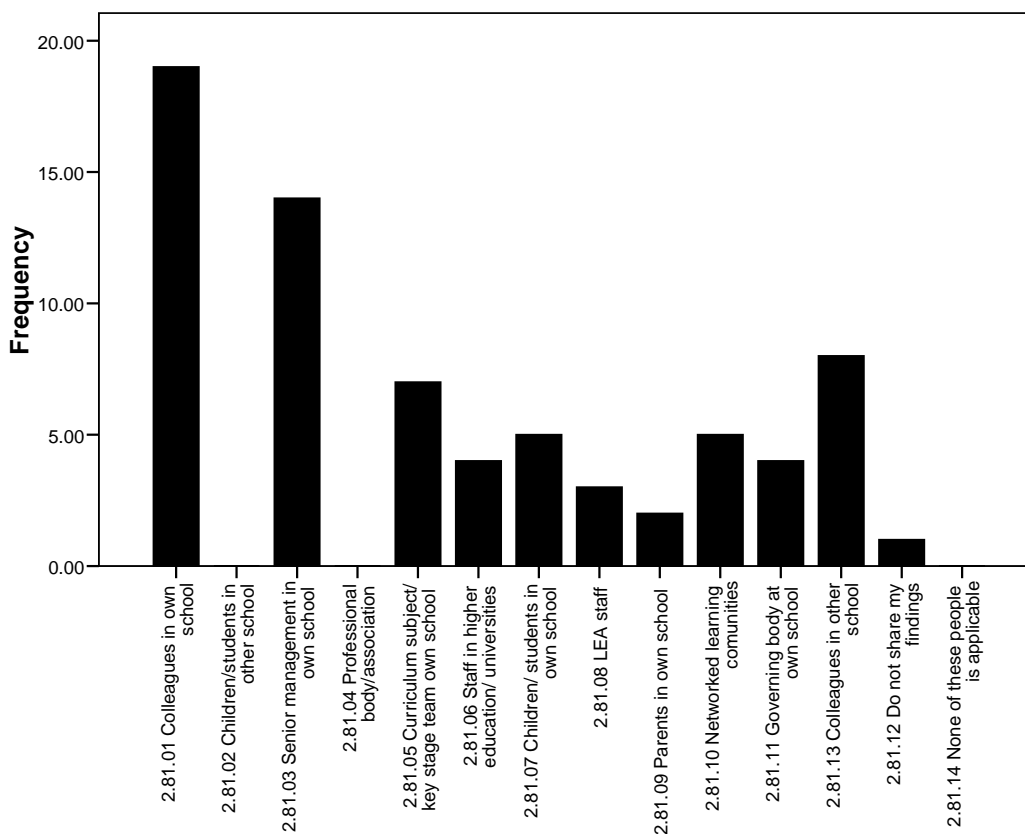
**Figure 6.4: frequency graph for aspects of enquiry that had been supported**

Figure 6.4 suggests that the options provided were relevant to participants as none indicated that they had not received support of the forms listed. The most common form of support identified by participants was for establishing an appropriate focus for action research. This suggests that, while there was initially an overall concern with improving the performance of science teaching, and then later with enhancing pupil independence, there was still scope for participants to identify a focus of their own. Just over half of the participants (11 of 20) also indicated that they had received support in ‘sharing the findings of their work with others’. This does not mean, however, that the findings of the remaining 9 participants, who did not select this response, were not shared, only that they had not received support in doing so.

Responses suggest that participants in this research had received more support during the early phases of their action research project (especially identifying a potential focus) than in concluding their action research and sharing findings, despite this being one of the aspirations of the network. Both forms of support, however, were more common than other aspects of the process, especially in issues around the ethics of action research which was selected by only three of the 20 participants.

### ***Sharing the action research process and outcomes***

The questionnaire also explored the process of sharing the conduct and outcomes of the action research, also through a multiple choice question. Participants' responses to this question are shown in Figure 6.5. Of 20 participants, one felt that they had not shared any aspect of their action research, the remaining 19 indicated that they had shared the conduct and outcomes of their action research with colleagues in their own schools and most (14) had also shared with their own school's senior management. Only a limited number of participants (7 of 20) indicated that they had shared the conduct or outcomes of their work with their department team or that they had shared their work with colleagues from other schools (8 of 20).



**Figure 6.5: frequency responses for sharing the conduct and outcomes of action research**

The above graphs seem to suggest that this network comprised individuals collaborating principally with colleagues from their own school, with some limited collaboration with colleagues across the network. However, the aspirations to achieve school improvement, which informed the initial application for funding to the Networked Learning Group, were shared by participants in the network; indeed their involvement may have been based on this complementarity of interests. However, whilst the high numbers of participants that had been directed to become involved in action research (see figure 6.1) is entirely in keeping with the initial improvement aspirations of the network, it seems to contradict the supposedly voluntary aspects of networking.

### ***Analysis of interviews***

Interviews conducted for this case study were also negotiated with network co-leaders who, in turn, approached network members to enquire about their willingness to participate in this phase of the research. In keeping with the overarching aspirations

of this thesis, only network members who had been involved in action research were invited to participate. Interestingly, this included one Headteacher who, whilst not one of the formally identified action research pairs highlighted in the documentary analysis, had been heavily involved in supporting those initial groups and had taken a more active role as an action researcher as the network evolved. Six participants agreed to participate in the interviews (see table 6.2).

Participant 1	Network co-leader, deputy headteacher and action research group member.
Participant 2	Action researcher.
Participant 3	Action researcher.
Participant 4	Headteacher and action research group member.
Participant 5	Action researcher.
Participant 6	Action researcher.

**Table 6.2: Interview participant profile**

Interview schedules were semi structured. The interviews were recorded, with the permission of participants, and transcribed before being analysed. The outcomes of this interview analysis are presented in two sections dealing with issues that participants raised about participatory interventions, first exploring the design and operation of Network 3.

### **The design and operation of Network 3**

This examination of the design and operation of Network 3 is achieved through a consideration of two issues, the first being an analysis of the comments made about the structures and processes of Network 3, and the second an exploration of how these network wide processes were related to the individual work of member schools.

#### *Network structures and processes*

As noted in the documentary analysis, Network 3 was initially based around an aspiration to improve teaching through paired research. This was set within a system of network wide support.

To begin with we all had two researchers in each school... and what is interesting is that in ours they have gone to support other teachers in the school so now they are also leading other teachers in doing this... we've had a big conference every year and that's really nice for us... and then there has



been this training provided by [name] at [university name] and all the researchers went to those and... found it useful, but actually they just really liked talking to other teachers about what they were doing. (Network 3 Participant 2)

Networks that were successful in joining the Networked Learning Communities programme were required to appoint two co-leaders. In the case of Network 3, one of these co-leaders (Participant 1) agreed to be interviewed for this research and described the organisation of the network as follows:

The network itself I think is well structured, [there are] two co-leaders, we always hoped that... our jobs would dissolve and that if we did our jobs properly other things would replace us and we would no longer be important as initiators. We've had a very good colleague from an HEI who has been really, really helpful. We set up [the structures] three years ago a group of people across seven schools to engage in enquiry... and having that group of researchers... meeting regularly was fantastic (Network 3 Participant 1)

In addition to outlining the role of the co-leaders, and the aspiration that this role would be less important as the network evolved, this quote also highlights the perceived importance of support provided by the university consultant. The aspirations of the network highlighted in the documentary analysis were, initially, to raise the standards of teaching by establishing action research pairs specifically involving in the 6 secondary schools, a science teacher matched with a teacher from a foundation subject. The ways in which these groups were brought together were described as follows by Participant 4:

[We] were asked to become involved in the network... We had to think of a focus related to thinking skills and Science or Humanities... it was quite hard to narrow it down to one particular thing and we decided teacher questioning was a good place to start because it involved us and what we could do in the classroom. (Network 3 Participant 4)

The intention to influence the teaching of science meant that many participants had been approached, or instructed, to participate. However, within the broad focus of improving science education there seemed, from the experience of Participant 4, to have been a great deal of flexibility for action researchers to decide how to achieve this overall aim, in doing so also emphasising the role of the external consultant in this process:

We've worked with someone [from a local university]. She was really influential because I think she helped to break down the barriers in terms of what action research is... before she came on board I think we were a bit unsure, we thought is this research? And when she came on board she was able to get rid of some of those insecurities about is this really valued, or is it not valued?... She was really good at talking us through the process of action research... It was really helpful, [even if only] in terms of just meeting with the other teachers. (Network 3 Participant 4)

The support of the external consultant seemed to demystify the process of action research and validate the action researchers' own interests. An additional benefit, in the eyes of Participant 4, was the opportunity to meet as a group, a feeling echoed by other participants and supported through a range of other network events, including network wide conferences held in collaboration with the local Gifted and Talented coordinators.

We've had two big conferences and there'll be another one for the third year, where everybody comes together... [with] all the researchers plus the managers plus G&T co-ordinators in schools. (Network 3 Participant 3)

These conferences were seen as marking the end of one cycle of action research. In the third year, the aspiration of Participant 4, at least, was to spread involvement in action research beyond the initial pairs throughout the school.

I was involved in the Teacher Researcher Programme... and it finished at the end of December some time... as a result of all the things I'd learnt, I took on board a whole school action research project. So I got all the staff on board in terms of them all doing their own mini action research projects and me overseeing how to go about doing an action research project. (Network 3 Participant 4)

These quotes emphasise the main features of Network 3, namely that it was a network based around teacher action research, conducted initially in pairs. This group of action researchers were supported by an external consultant through a series of meetings which culminated in an annual conference. How this action research related to participants and their schools is explored in more detail in the following section.

### ***Relating the operation of member schools to network activity***

Interview participants also spoke of the ways in which staff in network schools had been involved in the network. For Participant 3, the success of their action research

had been underpinned by their existing status as a 'beacon' school and the enthusiastic and committed staff which were perceived to be related to that status.

I think that the success that our action has had has to be partly due to the fact we had Beacon School status and, as a result of that, really had created a motivated workforce... So consequently getting involved in action research then, I think it could only move forward. (Network 3, Participant 3).

In this case, the school's culture was believed to have been an influential factor in the success of their participation in the network. This issue of culture was also commented upon by Participant 1, who was a deputy headteacher and co-leader of the network. To this participant, involvement in networked action research can be described as being either cultural or structural.

There's a structural approach and there's a cultural approach and I think what we tried to do is to grow a culture in which it is possible for people to engage in enquiry and it's also rewarding for them to do that... But I think if I was critical of the school I would say, well, we haven't yet really got a huge group of people engaged in action research. We don't have a group of 25 to 30 people that meets once a week and does that. (Network 3 Participant 1)

Participant 1 seems to aspire, through the network, to create a culture where it is possible for people to undertake action research, rather than creating a structure where they are obliged to, a more limited scope for participation than that described by other participants. For example Participant 4 outlines a whole school approach, in which the conduct of action research was built into the management processes of the school:

In our first year the most important thing for us was not just that it happened in our classrooms but that we were able to disseminate to other members of staff. So it wasn't just about me doing something in my classroom and that was it. It was built into our school inset programmes so we had to start at the end of year when we were going to talk and share and that was taken forward in the following academic year.... an important part of it was dissemination. It wasn't just about me improving my practice and that's why we were taking on a whole-school action research project. (Network 3 Participant 4)

Participant 4, a head teacher, emphasised the importance of dissemination to ensure that the conduct and outcomes of action research was at least shared with their colleagues and was further described by Participant 4 as follows.

This year has been entirely different because we've done a whole school action research project, so I've been leading that, in the previous two years [colleague] and I were working on individual projects, this year I'm kind of

overseeing the whole school action research project as well as doing my own mini-projects. (Network 3 Participant 4)

The implication of building from action research pairs to a whole school approach is characterised by Participant 4 as being a change in their role from conducting a limited project with a colleague, to leading other staff in the conduct of action research. This is a transition from developing practice to intentionally leading others through the process of action research, an issue that is revisited in the leadership section later in this chapter.

### **Participatory interventions and the nature of Network 3**

In addition to exploring the nature and operation of the network, interviews also identified issues relating to participatory interventions. This section presents three issues highlighted by participants in this research, namely: the nature of action research; participant ownership and change; and leadership in Network 3.

#### *Comments on the nature of action research*

The conduct of action research was a central feature of Network 3, originally through the establishment of pairs of researchers in member schools and then in spreading involvement to other staff. Interview participants had all been action researchers and to Participant 5, action research was associated with evaluating and measuring the effect of interventions:

You obviously have to have something to measure. In terms of... classroom practices it's seeing whether this thing that you're looking at has any impact on your class... If I use this in my classroom will it improve the things that I'm trying to improve?... for us it was what tools can we use to improve thinking skills? (Network 3 Participant 5)

The model of action research described here involves measuring and evaluating classroom practices, in particular to understand what effect interventions associated with that action research might have had. One participant spoke of how her initial perceptions of what constitutes action research had changed.

I've learnt so much about action research ... when we first started out ... I always associated action research with something very academic, something that you might do at university or something that required lots of data collection, something that was to do with producing an end piece which was

reams of paper or a big thesis sort of thing... [Now] I think of action research as enquiry, doing what I do anyway as a teacher, being reflective about the kind of practice I use in my classroom, about the way in which I teach the children, but just make it a bit more evidenced based. So just being able to say to people "I know this works in my classroom because I have figures at the beginning, I have figures at the end "... being able to show people that this works, and having the evidence to do that, whereas at the beginning I literally just thought it would be me going away, reading lots and lots and at the end having to come up with something that was like a huge booklet... and I just wouldn't have the time to do it. (Network 3 Participant 4)

The experience that this participant had gained had changed their perceptions of action research from notions of addressing a sizeable issue, of producing and engaging with publications, to something more based in experience but concerned with evidence and data informed practice. It is interesting to note that they describe this new, less rigorous, perspective on action research as being 'enquiry' a term which, as noted in the literature review, was popular with the Networked Learning Group at the NCSL. This participant also associates the reality of their experience of being an action researcher with a reflective approach to practice. This was a view that other participants shared, in the following quote identifying that this form of reflection was stimulated by reading.

There has been thinking and reading and understanding of what we're doing... As an outcome of this, I think [name] and [name] are more reflective teachers... I think anything that will move people's thinking towards not just the difficulties and the problems but the possibilities... It's that reflective learner which is what we're all meant to be as teachers but in reality very few people are. (Network 3 Participant 6)

In addition to this perception of action research being a reflective process, other features were emphasised. Participant 1 felt that, through engaging in action research, teachers were also encouraged individually to become more critical which, collectively, could then influence the entire school culture.

It gives them the tools and the equipment to do it but it also gives them the opportunity to engage in dialogue with people outside because I do think they are narrow and parochial and anecdotal at times... I think what we have to do in our schools is encourage people to work outside. This is what action research does, it establishes the legitimacy of a body of knowledge outside the school, it challenges what I think we often get in teaching which is: 'This is what happens in my classroom therefore I know it to be true'... We've tried within the school to encourage the staff to be critical, not destructively critical,

but to ask difficult questions... in a constructive manner. We don't see it as challenging. We see it as part of a healthy school. (Network 3 Participant 1)

Engaging in action research, therefore, was perceived to stimulate a productive critical dialogue amongst participants, which in turn challenges preconceived notions of practice. However Participant 1 was keen to emphasise that not only was this form of critique constructive, it was also part of establishing a healthy school community.

### ***Participant ownership and change***

One of the aspirations of basing the network around action research was that it would allow participants to tackle issues of particular concern to them. Participant 4 explains that decisions about what issues were to be addressed were in the hands of participants and were not prescribed by external organisations such as a local authority.

Because it was something that we had done, it wasn't something that, like the government had said you should go and try this, when we disseminated it to the rest of the staff it was easy for us to say this worked with our children and with our school because we've done it and you work with the same children as us, you know it's not something that's been imposed upon us and that we've tried and I think they were more open to it as well because it was something that other teachers had done rather than a booklet saying right, this is a new strategy and we're going to do this... We know the ways in which our school needs to improve and one of the best ways in which we can find out about it is getting our teachers to investigate in their own classroom and getting them to choose something that they want to find out more about. (Network 3 Participant 4)

This outlines a view that basing developments associated with the network in the experience of teachers in member schools enhances ownership, not only of those teachers but also of their colleagues who, because of the close relationships between the espoused change and experience of their colleagues, will be more accepting of that change. The mechanism believed to be critical in achieving this is the conduct of enquiry which achieves ownership by encouraging an investigative approach. This is a point examined in the previous section detailing the action research aspects of the network, but action research is also described here as the network mechanism by which ownership is achieved. This issue of ownership was also outlined by one of the co-leaders of the network who spoke about the principles on which the network was founded.

When I speak to quite a lot of schools the tension is that they will start off... with whole-school needs as identified in the School Improvement Plan. And I think in the network in a way we sometimes start from a slightly anarchic sense of starting off with the teachers' needs and saying 'What are the gifts, what are the challenges, what are the passions that this particular person has got? And, how can we harness these to move the school on?'... If you allow people to do that which they're passionate about they will do it much better... if you employ people who are questioning about their own practice, the nature of the school in which they are, their work will throw up questions that they want to find answers to. And if you enable them to identify and then chase those questions, you are ... naturally then answering the school's problems because the problems that they are interested in have evolved from the school. (Network 3 Participant 1)

In the mind of one co-leader, a principle of Network 3 was to start from a question about the attributes and aspirations of individuals, which can then be enhanced through a questioning, enquiry based, approach for the benefit of their institutions, a perception that there is a direct link between the development of individuals and the improvement of their organisations. However, the nature of networks, as collective enterprises, has also provided a challenge to this. The question is how to encourage wider membership in the network, making use of the experience of existing members but continuing to provide the same degree of ownership opportunities for new members.

We found it hard in the second year. In the first year it was fine. There were only two researchers from every school and everyone was very eager but in the second year when we had two more researchers come aboard from each school it was really hard to integrate them ... At the beginning we all had the same starting point: we were all brand new, didn't know anything about action research. In second year... we wanted to move on ... but we'd taken on some new second year researchers as well, so do we start from the beginning? (Network 3 Participant 4)

Whilst the ownership of members of Network 3 has been identified by participants as a common aspiration for the network, it has also highlighted a challenge about how to make the most of working collectively but retaining individual ownership. This influence of participants on each other through the network also relates to leadership issues in the network which are identified in the following section.

### *Leadership and the nature of Network 3*

The last issue to be raised in this section relates to the nature of leadership in Network 3. This was mentioned by Participant 4 who believed that there was a benefit in 'having teachers lead enquiry rather than have the LEA tell us what to do' (Network 3 Participant 4). This issue was raised in the section about participant ownership and change as it describes the benefit of network members deciding on their own priorities for change, and embarking on a strategy for achieving their own aspirations, rather than having both imposed from an external source, such as a local authority, or government.

This also has a leadership dimension as the role of action researchers within Network 3 developed to become leaders of other action researchers within their organisations. This informal influence, derived from network action research projects, has led to some action researchers from the network taking up more formal leadership positions in their schools:

So one of the things that we tried to do within the school is have ... decision-making bodies and to kind of pick out people who are interested in enquiry and get them to take leadership roles ... I would say that the people who do participate in [networked action research], in terms of the way that they go about their leadership roles. (Network 3 Participant 1)

This quote from Participant 1 describes involvement in action research both as an opportunity for participants to take up new leadership roles within their schools, but also as an approach beneficial to existing leaders. As noted above, the organisation of action research in Network 3 developed over the three years of its funding. This transition was described by Participant 2 as follows:

To begin with, we all had two action researchers in each school who started the network and what is interesting is that in ours they have gone to support other teachers in the school so now they are also leading other teachers in doing this. (Network 3 Participant 2)

In this case, the original action researchers had then gone on to lead action research being conducted by other teachers. To some this transition from leadership relating to influence derived from action research projects, to more formally recognised



leadership roles, can provide an opportunity to address the succession planning of their organisations.

We've always looked... to grow leaders from within. I think we've discovered over the last 10 years that when we look [for action researchers] we look for leaders of tomorrow so we don't much mind if they haven't got a lot of experience. We look... for people whose values and attitudes were seen to indicate they... are reflective, that they have a passion for education [and] for their own learning. (Network 3 Participant 1)

The type of reflection associated with an action research approach is regarded as being a desirable quality that this participant looks for in potential school leaders. The effective application of networked action research is, however, also believed to be dependent on existing leaders. According to Participant 3, for example, the potential for action research to influence the development of member schools can be enhanced by relating it to formal school management procedures, such as the school development plan.

Where the head teacher has clearly made a commitment... then it's been more successful. It goes without saying... because then it is going to be in the School Development Plan... It is going to have a profile within the school. ... Where those heads have teaching and learning at the heart of their school and driving their school, you've got more effective action research going on. (Network 3 Participant 3)

Establishing a relationship between formal school management procedures and the more informal conduct of action research seems to require commitment from senior leaders. As a result, the potential benefits for individual schools vary according to the commitment of the headteacher to the network. Participant 1, a co-leader in the network, described three levels of commitment.

It has been really a waste of time in some schools, and in fact one school has now dropped out... I think that has been because the vision didn't really reflect what some people believe about teacher education... for example, if you really believe that teacher education can transform the experience of children in your schools you... release your people during the day to go to seminars... and give them jobs in the school that allow them to develop and share those skills... you don't palm off on a project some disenchanted... teacher... and say 'I'm going to do that so I can get them off my back.'... We've also got another group of schools that have welcomed it in, they've kind of sucked it dry, used it, but they don't really believe that they're going to learn much from working with other schools. So they've used it internally, fantastically, but the network as a whole hasn't benefited. And then we've got some schools... it's been

really, really effective and I can certainly look at one school which has had a really rough time. It's just survived OfSTED. And you can see that what has happened with their researchers [is that they] have formed the kernel of a group of really committed teachers who are not going to abandon the school even though it's in quite a lot of trouble and they are going to work and they have got the tools to work. (Network 3 Participant 1)

To this co-leader the headteachers of schools that have been members of the network have been either fully committed to action research and the entire network, committed fully to developing individual practices, but not to sharing those practices or collaborating with other schools, or unconvinced of either the benefits of action research or network, indeed using this as an opportunity to keep less desirable members of staff occupied. Whilst the networked conduct of action research is believed to have a great deal of potential to achieve beneficial change the actual benefits obtained are directly related to the commitment to the principles of this work by senior leaders.

### ***Issues arising from this case***

The three different sources of data have raised a number of issues from this particular case. These are drawn together in an exploration of three overriding themes below. The first of these themes concerns the nature of the network and how it relates to issues of voluntarism.

### **Voluntarism, action research and definitions of improvement**

The case study of Network 3 offers one potential application of a network to improve practices in one particular subject area although in doing so it raises question over the nature of networking and of action research. Based around the initial bid and subsequent annual reviews explored in the documentary analysis, Network 3 initially established a focus which was concerned with improving the quality of the education students received in Science, an area identified as a concern. It should be noted, however, that this initial focus was not sustained throughout all three years of the network. At the time of this research, a developing concern with student independence was identified as an aspiration of the network for year three.

However, the results from the questionnaire did seem to further enlighten the views of this initial strategy. The most popular reasons for becoming involved in action

research, identified by participants, were to achieve individual, departmental and school improvement. This is entirely consistent with the aspiration to enhance practices in what were seen to be underperforming areas of the curriculum. In addition, 12 of the 23 participants indicated that they had been directed to become involved with the action research aspects of the network. In the interviews, participants (in particular Participant 4) identified that the freedom to set their own direction and identify their own areas for change and development were important factors in the perceived success of their work and important factors in the operation of the network as a whole. The decision to identify a curriculum area of weakness and, as a result, to compel participation seems somewhat contradictory to this aspiration for participant ownership. However, the questionnaire also highlighted the range of topics addressed by participants in their action research. This is significant because it suggests two levels in deciding on the focus for action research, the first being the aspirations of the network as a whole, the second the meaning that individuals then make of that overall aspiration in deciding how they wish to seek improvement.

Despite the stage of mediation, in which individual participants make meaning of the overall focus in their own practice, this still seems to raise an issue about the extent to which a network can be considered to be participatory when it is based on external measures of accountability and on subsequent directed involvement of a sizeable number of participants in the network. However, this network also provides a more sophisticated picture than a simple polarity between a 'top down' view of change, which might include prescribed change, and the 'bottom up' aspirations of network and participatory change. First, there is a stage of mediation in which participants interrogate the overall purposes of the network through their own practice, secondly the network as a whole was seeking to spread the processes and practices through the experiences of these action researchers, both by embedding this approach in school practices and by encouraging action researchers to support their colleagues in conducting their own projects. This led to a change of role for some of the action researchers, from being directed to participate to improve their own practice, to taking wider leadership roles, one of a number of leadership issues which are explored in the following section.

## **Leadership, change and the process of networked action research**

The second issue arising from this case concerns leadership. This was first emphasised in the documentary analysis which highlighted a transition in the role of the initial group of action researchers from conducting research in school pairs to becoming lead researchers. This transition was made in the third year of the network and seems to have been intended to make use of the experience of the research pairs who had been working for two years. This is also consistent with the aspirations of Participant 1 who believed that action research was an effective method for developing potential leaders. This participant suggested that the individuals whose personal qualities match the reflective aspirations of action research are considered to be suitable for future leadership posts.

Leadership was also discussed in reference to the role of the headteacher. Participants 1 and 3 both spoke of the importance of gaining commitment from senior managers if the school and network is to be a success. Participant 4, a headteacher, also spoke of an aspiration for all staff in their school to be action researchers. This role of the headteacher included acting as an advocate for the work of the network and of the action research aspects which were applied in individual schools. An additional benefit was perceived where the headteacher could ensure that projects were embedded into school development plans, thus making action research central to the work of the school. This issue of the interaction of school processes and development through networked action research was given a particular interpretation by Participant 1, through a distinction between culture and structure, an issue explored in more depth in the following section.

## **Structure, culture and the scope of collaboration in Network 3**

The third theme to be explored refers to structural and cultural features of the network. This theme borrows directly from the quote from Participant 1 above, in which s/he draws a distinction between a structural and cultural approach to adopting action research throughout their institution. This metaphor could be spread to the differing features of the network as a whole. Network 3 was based around the aspiration to improve teaching practice through the development of imposed pairings in member schools which, as noted above, seem to have had a degree of compulsion

about them. This provided the structural features of the network which were enhanced through a series of action research workshops run by a representative from a local HEI. As noted above, these features were intended to achieve improvements in practices across the network. This structuring of the network is emphasised in the responses to the questionnaire in which participants reported that the collaborative aspects of their work were centred in their own schools. The interviews confirmed that school collaboration was principally in the form of pairs of action researchers, as envisaged.

However, with the development of the network, this structural approach was being built upon with aspirations to involve more staff and spread the practices and approaches to action research established through the initial paired projects. This interacts with cultural aspirations in two senses. First, the decision about who was going to be approached to become involved in the action research aspects of the network was characterised by Participant 1 as being a cultural one. In other words, the decision about who would be an appropriate individual to participate in this work was made from a consideration of which individuals have the characteristics to be suitable participants in the action research aspects of this work.

The second feature relates to the wider culture of schools. The headteacher who agreed to be interviewed (Participant 4) also spoke about the cultural aspects of action research, although not explicitly. In this case, action research was seen as a common approach which could be implemented throughout the school, in doing so developing the culture of the school to more of a collaborative culture of action researchers. A second interpretation of the interaction between culture and action research, then, is that action research can be applied across institutions with the intention of influencing the culture of those institutions. A third view of the interaction of culture and action research takes the opposite view to that posed by Participant 4 (that action research can be used to further develop school culture). Participant 3 suggests that the success of action research can be influenced by the existing culture of the organisation concerned. In this case the positive culture of the school was believed to have been associated with the beacon status of their school.

There appear to be network-wide implications of this approach to supporting action research with the aspiration from Participant 1, a co-leader in the network, that their job would become redundant as the role of action research spread throughout the network and the network participants started taking ownership of the network itself. This would mark a transition from the structural features of the network, which were necessary in its inception, and which ensured certain collaborative practices, towards a network of action research embedded in member schools, and which would be more associated with the cultural aspects of those institutions, individually and collectively. The cultural features of this work also provide a different way of perceiving the compulsion aspects of the network. This was a particular feature of Network 3, which differs from both the previous case studies and from the literature around networking, all of which emphasised the importance of voluntarism. The aspired transition of Network 3 from directed collaboration, to become embedded cultural feature of local schools, changes this perception of voluntarism. In the early stages, many teachers were instructed to participate, in the aspirations of the later stages the network is owned by the participants and is voluntary in the sense that those participants then control the direction that the development of the network takes through their actions and the choices that they make.

## **Overview**

This case study is of a network that had initially adopted a networked action research approach as a mechanism for simulating change almost exclusively with teachers in underperforming subject areas. This was associated with some participants being directed to take part as each school identified pairs of individuals to act as action researchers, of whom one needed to be a science teacher (the subject area targeted for improvement). The common aspects of the work of these action researchers was the overall topic, of improving science, and the facilitation through a common process by a representative of a local University. In other respects, the action research conducted in this network was based within participating institutions. Whilst the outcomes and processes were shared, the main shared features of the network were the overall topic, the common facilitation and the dissemination of outcomes at conferences.

From a starting point of establishing research pairs within individual schools, the network then aspired to spread participation beyond these initial limitations encouraging more staff to become involved and, in doing so, developing the roles of existing action researchers to take more of a leadership responsibility in supporting the work of their colleagues.

This was one of a number of leadership issues which were described by participants in this network. Others included the importance of senior management support for networked action research and the value of relating this work directly to the management of participating schools. However, this network does also raise a number of questions about the nature of change in action research networks in general and in the networked learning communities. The advocated basis of these networks is on voluntarism with aspirations for participant ownership and bottom up change. This network started with a form of compulsion, in deciding on an accountability related focus and then requiring participation from some staff in that area, but then evolved as those initial participants were intended to take greater ownership and have a more enhanced leadership role within the network and their own school. In this case, it seems that participant ownership developed over time but the network required a greater degree of direction at its inception.

## Chapter Seven: Analysis

Each of the three preceding case study chapters concluded by identifying issues drawn from that particular case study whilst the conclusion of the literature review explored issues arising from the interaction of action research, network and participatory intervention literature. This chapter builds on these by examining the issues raised in the three case studies in comparison with each other and with those raised at the conclusion of the literature review. The issues identified in the preceding chapters interrelate and overlap in a wide variety of ways and five themes have been identified which are explored below and outlined in a table in Appendix 7. Each of these themes is dealt with individually in this chapter and are, in order:

- Theme 1: approaches to networking action research.
- Theme 2: conceptions of, and engagement with, communities.
- Theme 3: developing collaborative relationships in action research networks.
- Theme 4: voluntarism, participation and ownership over change.
- Theme 5: leadership and networked action research.

### ***Theme 1: approaches to networking action research***

The first theme to be examined concerns the approaches that the three case study networks took towards networking action research. As outlined in the methodology chapter it was the prominence that these networks had given to action research, an approach which had been advocated by the Networked Learning Communities themselves, (Jackson, 2002, 2006; NCSL, 2006a), which informed their selection as cases for this thesis. The approaches that the three case study networks took to action research are explored below, the first stage of which concerns an exploration of individual and network aspirations for action research.

### **Establishing a focus for changing practice**

The first stage of network case studies was an analysis of documents for each network. This provided an outline of the approach that each network had taken to action research and explained some of the reasoning behind that particular approach. This included noting that each network had used different terms to describe their



work, Action Inquiry or Inquiry in Network 1, Enquiry in Network 2 and Action Research in Network 3.

The documents from Network 1 described how the network had already been using an action research approach within member schools through the establishment of School Inquiry Groups (SIGs). The documents suggested that, with the inception of the Networked Learning Communities, this would become more 'networked' by providing a more common focus and more common events. The other two networks seemed to have been brought together deliberately in response to the chance to apply to be a part of the Networked Learning communities programme but the documents produced by each network also provided a picture of how they 'networked' action research, having received funding.

Network 2 was notable for the large numbers of action researchers in comparison to the other two networks. In one network document this number was given as 72, a number which had risen to over 90 by the time that the questionnaires were completed 18 months later. These documents also outlined a focus on pupil learning, an aspiration which had arisen from a concern about rates of improvement in regional schools. The suggestion was that the application of networked action research would be able to reinvigorate a process of improvement in schools which had recently plateaued. Documents from Network 3 also outlined an improvement aspiration. However, rather than establishing a general focus, these improvements efforts were, initially, targeted at one subject area (science)<sup>15</sup> and were to be achieved through pairs, termed 'research partners', working in member schools but coming together to receive support in the process of action research from an external consultant.

The aspirations for networked action research were also explored at an individual level, through questionnaires and interviews. Participants in all three networks described how they had, within the overall structures outlined above, a great deal of freedom in identifying topics or issues to be addressed. This interest of participants in Networks 2 and 3 in the 'improvement' potential of networked action research was

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<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that whilst the aspiration to improve Science teaching had been identified as a core principal of the network the one primary school member did not have as clear a concern with this area of the curriculum as the secondary school members. Nonetheless they did adopt the same approach of organising research partners.

also evident in the reasons participants gave for becoming involved in the action research aspects of all three networks in the first place. This was illustrated in questionnaire responses in which ‘improve classroom practice’, and ‘support student learning’ were amongst the most commonly selected reasons for being involved in networked action research. Of 15 possible choices, these two options highlighted were in the top 5 most commonly selected by participants in Network 1, the top 3 most commonly selected in Network 2 and the equal most commonly selection options by participants in Network 3.

In some respects, these interests in improvement (as described in network documents, questionnaire responses and interviews) are consistent with the aspirations of action research being focussed tightly on both the practices of the participant and on the contexts of their work (Elliott, 1991). However, there is a concern that such a focus on standards is restricted to a performative agenda (Ball, 2003; Elliott, 1996) and does not necessarily address the aspirations for achieving social justice that others have for action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, 2005; Grundy, 1987). These are issues which are expanded on later but this does establish a common focus for these networks of developing educational practices focussed on classrooms, with the aspiration to enhance pupil learning as a result.

### **Forms of networking action research**

The action research section of the literature review, discussed in chapter 2, identified the following three facets of action research:

- a focus on personal understanding and reflexive approaches to change (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Winter, 1989)
- an emphasis on collaboration between participants in social settings (Heron, 1996; Oja & Smulyan, 1989)
- engaging with community perspectives and providing them with opportunities to be involved in a process of knowledge construction and change (Lewin, 1948; Stringer, 1999).

As outlined in the preceding section of this chapter, the three networks studied for this thesis seem explicitly to address the first of these through an aspiration to develop

personal understanding and practices. The other two facets, concerning collaboration and communities, are also evident in these cases studies. Indeed the comparison of themes arising from cases (see Appendix 7) explicitly raises issues of community and collaboration. Both of these are explored in separate sections below, but before that the approach taken to networking action research in each of the networks is explored in more detail.

An explicit link is made between action research and networks in literature. To some action research is seen as a method for investigating networks of social relationships (Foth, 2006; Foth & Hearn, 2007), whilst to others networks can be a medium for organising and supporting action research conducted, principally, by practitioners (see for example: Day & Hadfield, 2004; McLaughlin, Black-Hawkins, McIntyre, & Townsend, 2007). In this regard networks of action research are seen as a way of providing individuals with community relationships in a society which is becoming increasingly individualised (Posch, 1994), an aspiration which is not limited to just action research networks but is referred to educational networks in general (Hadfield, 2005) and one which is also emphasised in the separating effects of competitive school accountability systems (Lieberman, 2000). This is consistent with the three case studies conducted for this thesis in which participants spoke of their enthusiasm for the network being derived from an opportunity to collaborate in contexts where this had been limited by competitive accountability as exemplified in the following extract:

[T]he thing that encouraged us was that we felt that we had control and were able to choose what we wanted to do... it wasn't something that the government wanted us to do or any of the initiatives from outside that pile in. (Network 1, Participant 7)

This quote is typical of the views of participants from each network (see chapter 4-6). The discussion above outlines common aspirations to establish a focus on practice, to achieve improvements for individuals and organisations and to do so around the interests of individual participants, in contrast with the enforced change associated with government policy. However, bringing groups of practitioners together from different schools in action research networks remained a challenge for the three networks studied and each adopted differing approaches to achieving this. Whilst

there are differences between each network, the approaches that each adopted are reviewed here as belonging to two main approaches of networking action research. These have been drawn directly from the case study chapters and concern the ways in which action research relates to the network as a whole and to individual member schools. The intention of this section is that, by summarising these approaches here, the issues relating to them can be explored in more detail in the sections which follow.

### *A nested approach to networking action research*

The Networked Learning Communities were established as networks of schools and so they are, by design, based around the aspirations of member organisations. The question here is how they collaborate together beyond these organisational confines and, specifically, the part that action research plays in this. One aspect of this concerns how the network can establish a coherent identity whilst retaining the flexibility which is believed to be one of the main features of educational networks (Lieberman, 2000). The common expectation of Network 1 was that schools would identify a group of action researchers. This was sometimes extended to an overarching focus but the network provided flexibility both for schools to organise their action researchers as suited them and to identify their own focus for development. This led to variations in the size and composition of the action research groups and in the topics that they identified.

Network 3 operated a similar approach in that it established action researchers to collaborate within member school. However in contrast with Network 1 there was, initially at least, less flexibility over the topics for action research, with almost all schools concerned with improving science teaching, and on how action research was organised, with each school identifying a pair of action researchers to work together. This actually changed later in the development of the network as schools started to explore different ways for extending involvement in action research but, at least in the early days of the network, this was a universally applied approach.

Whilst Network 1 and 3 differ in the specifics of how action research was organised, they both adopted an approach where collaborative action research pairs or groups were established, or 'nested', within member schools. This meant that the schools

which were part of the networks had a shared basis of action research and that the contact between schools, the networking, was developed from this action research, i.e. action research provided a common basis for networking to happen, but was not the mechanism through which networking occurred.

Nesting action research groups or pairs in member schools provides the chance to closely relate the work to those schools, in doing so providing a direct link between the aspirations of the network and member schools and the chance to base collaborative action research around existing working relationships, or to make the most of the enhanced opportunity for people who work in the same organisation to develop practices collaboratively. The challenge for this nested approach is in extending the work of action researchers beyond their schools. This intention to collaborate between schools was much more explicitly outlined in Network 2, as outlined in the following section.

### ***An overlapping approach to networking action research***

The alternative adopted by Network 2 is an overlapping approach to networking action research. Groups of action researchers were formed of members from different schools, thus the relationships of participants cross institutional boundaries by design. This explicitly brings together participants from different schools to collaborate with each other, in doing so intending to achieve, by design, the aspiration to encourage schools to work together, challenging the competitive environment which had previously prevented them from doing so (Jackson, 2006). The challenge in establishing overlapping action research groups, by bringing together individuals from different schools, is that they lack either the existing relationships derived from having worked together or the regularity of contact through working for the same organisation, which would allow them to develop such collaboration around existing work. An additional challenge is in ensuring that the interests of the institutions are reasonably represented in the work of the groups, with benefits for them.

The implications of these two approaches are explored through the thematic cross-case analysis, linked to the literature, outlined in the rest of this chapter. In one respect they concern the extent to which the network (as an intervention strategy)

relates to existing networks of relationships. The nested approach is based in these relationships, whilst the overlapping approach is intended to form a new network of relationships. However, an additional consistent feature of these three networks was the use of facilitators to support this action research, an issue explored in the following section.

### **The role of the facilitator in networked action research**

Each of the three networks studied identified facilitators to support the action research features of their work. In participatory interventions the role of facilitator is adopted by the researcher and is believed to be one of the differences between participatory and other forms of research (Holland & Blackburn, 1998; Levin, 1999).

Two of the three networks made explicit reference to the role of external facilitators in supporting action research. In Network 3, an external facilitator had provided a series of action research seminars and participants had spoken of the increase in understanding of the 'technical' aspects of action research and the resulting increase in confidence that attendance at these events had given them. In Network 1, the facilitators had a similar role in network events but had also provided support to within-school action research groups. Participants in Network 1 spoke of the benefit of having a perspective on their work from outside the school and in the stimulus provided through establishing regular meetings. In this regard, the facilitators were acting as brokers of knowledge, a role of network facilitators identified by a number of authors (Hadfield & Chapman, 2009; Kubiak, 2009; Wohlstetter et al., 2003), in particular this support was focussed on the processes of action research and not on the specific educational practices implemented as a result.

This process of facilitation is not always smooth and a number of problematic issues are identified in the role of facilitators in participatory intervention literature. These concern conflicts which can arise between the differing agendas of facilitators and participants (Humphries et al., 2000) or the 'paternal trap' of the stronger, external facilitator, changing things for the weaker community member (Chambers, 2000). This is also an issue which has been explored in relation to action research networks, and raised as a tension for consultants, or facilitators, to be aware of (Day &

Townsend, 2007). However, participants in this study did not identify any such tensions in their relationships with external facilitators, indeed in all cases the support that these facilitators had provided was described as being both focussed on the process of action research and consistent with the aspirations of the participants themselves.

The adoption of facilitators suggests that these networks were operating ‘functional participation’ (Pretty, 1995b), in which groups access support from external facilitators to achieve their aims. This seems especially relevant as, in this form of participation, communities gradually take over the processes through which change is achieved from external facilitators and there was evidence in all three networks of the establishment of internal facilitation in addition, or in place of, the external facilitators discussed above. Indeed, in Network 2, this was the only form of facilitation identified by participants, in which headteachers took responsibility for the facilitation of a cross-school action research group. Headteachers were also believed to have a facilitatory role in supporting the action research groups within their schools in Network 1. However, his role was not formalised as in Network 2 but rather the facilitatory aspect of headteachers’ roles was a general principle.

It was in Network 3, though, where a transfer of facilitation from external to internal was most evident. As noted above the original facilitation of action research in Network 3 had been provided by an external academic. The network then used the experiences of the original group of action researchers to act as within-school facilitators of other action researchers, thus extending participation. This establish a means by which a wider community could be involved in networked action research, one of the issues explored in the following section concerning the relationship between this work and notions of community.

## ***Theme 2: conceptions of, and engagement with, communities***

This discussion of the communities dimensions of networks is based around two main issues. The first concerns the ways in which these networks could be related to the community engagement principles of the three areas of literature. The second explores the development of communities through networks.

## **Managing relationships, encouraging inter-community collaboration**

One of the aspirations of both participatory interventions and action research is to involve communities in a process of change (Park, 1999; Stringer, 1999). The communities in question are supported in examining, interpreting and representing their own experiences (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a). This aspiration emphasises the better understanding of contexts that is gained from giving community members in those contexts a chance to participate in research. It is also emphasised in action research (Elliott, 1991), as one of the methodological justifications for participatory interventions (Schafft & Greenwood, 2003) and is consistent with studies which identify networks as a way to involve teachers as the primary actors in their own development (Lieberman & Wood, 2003).

Participants in all three networks echoed these aspirations, describing their action research as providing opportunities for practitioners to interrogate, examine and interpret their own practice, free from the pressures and imposition of externally imposed policy. Participants (as emphasised in the quote from Participant 7 from Network 1 above) related this to issues of control and described how the network had allowed them to identify and take control over change in ways that government policy had prevented. This issue was also raised explicitly in the guide for Network 2, describing the network as a way to encourage ‘bottom up’ change and, in doing so, re-professionalising education.

Each of these networks, therefore, echoed the aspirations of the literature, noted above, to provide individuals and communities with the chance to study their own contexts. Their approach, based around identifying groups or pairs of action researchers from within the community, was an approach consistent with that of ‘community action research’ (Bray et al., 2000; Stringer, 1999). This approach to networking action research involved or engaged communities in different ways. In Networks 1 and 2, the approach was to establish separate groups of action researchers for different communities of network members. In both networks, separate action research elements of the network were organised for headteachers and



school staff whilst Network 1 also arranged separate action research for pupils, through pupil voice and students-as-researchers projects.

This separation of three ‘communities’ of action researchers (headteachers, school staff and pupils) was related to concerns about the influence each could have on the others. One aspect of this was the suggestion that headteachers should support the action researchers in their school, and across the network, but in doing so should limit the effect that they had on them. As noted above, this led Steering Group members in Network 2 to take the role of ‘facilitators’ of overlapping action research groups. Headteacher participants from Network 1 also identified that there had been a commitment to support action researchers in their schools but without having excessive influence over their work. These headteachers suggested that the concerns about the potential influence that differing communities could have on each other were well founded. They described feeling accountable for their schools and the contribution they had made to the network but without having direct control over the work done, in doing so raising concerns about the pervasive influence of performativity cultures (Ball, 2003; Elliott, 1996).

This separation of communities could be seen as being contrary to the collaborative aspirations of the Networked Learning Communities. It could also be seen as contrary to the aspirations that some people have of both participatory interventions and action research, that they will both identify and challenge sources of influence in social settings (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, 2005; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995) and to the suggestion that networks are solely ‘bottom up’ models for change (Veugelers, 2004). Alternatively, this strategy could be viewed as a realistic approach for taking into account the differing responsibilities and resulting influences that these communities could have on each other. In attempting to achieve participatory change, these networks are located in the reality of existing power structures of participating schools, although in doing so raising a question over the extent to which these power structures are, as a result, reified, rather than challenged, through the network.

The separation of participants from different communities into different action research groups also relates to concerns raised about both action research networks and participatory interventions, that the involvement of individuals with differing

responsibilities can result in competing agendas (Day & Townsend, 2007; Humphries et al., 2000; Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). The difference between the tensions identified in participatory intervention literature, and the three networks studied for this thesis, concerns the origin of the participant and facilitator. A source of competing agendas in participatory interventions is believed to be between the interests of the external researcher and community participants (Humphries et al., 2000). In these case studies, the role of external facilitators was not identified as having caused any such tensions, rather the tensions were believed to have been derived from individuals having different roles in the same context. This appears to be akin to the problems observed in some projects, that some participants do not spread participation to others in their own context (Kamali, 2007).

In contrast to Networks 1 and 2, the initial identification of a 'community' in Network 3 was related directly to performance management, being focussed on improving the performance of Science teachers. But despite this performance related aspiration the concerns over the potentially competing agendas of external facilitators and community members were similarly not evident in Network 3, with participants describing that they had benefitted from this support for the process of action research without identifying any conflicts.

In addition to raising issues about the competing agendas of community participants and facilitators, concerns have been raised about objectifying and assuming both homogeneity and harmony of communities in participatory approaches (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Mohan, 2001; Stirrat, 1997). Furthermore, some studies of school networks suggest that they have only limited involvement of members of school communities (Earl et al., 2006). These criticisms seem relevant to the initial approaches of Network 3, in which a 'community' of failing practitioners were intended to be improved through the network, thus both limiting participation to this community and assuming homogeneity (in the assumption that all were failing). However, their role changed over time with them adopting more of a facilitation position in supporting the action research of their colleagues.

However, these criticisms of community involvement do emphasise differences between the conduct of participatory interventions and the operation of these

networks in the ways in which they conceive of communities. Participants in all three case study networks were not intended to be representative of their community, as described in participatory projects (see for example the concerns raised about this in Kamali, 2007). Rather, the intention of these networks was to provide opportunities for community members to interrogate their own context and their own practice, not the practice of other members of the same community, and in that regard participants had a tight focus on individual practices and a great deal of freedom to interrogate and improve them. The aspirations of these networks to base their work around the contexts of communities was, therefore, extended to the contexts of individual participants. As participants were not intended to be representative of their communities, their work was not based on assumptions of homogeneity or harmony. These issues are explored in more depth in the section exploring voluntarism, representation and participation.

### **Developing communities through networked action research**

As well as exploring how networks involved communities of participants, the three case studies conducted for this thesis also highlighted the potential for networks to be able to influence the formation of communities. This has also been identified in networking literature and illustrated in the case of the Coalition of Essential Schools in which communities were believed to be developed through dialogue between participants, stimulated through the process of networking (Darling-Hammond et al., 1995).

Community formation was directly associated, by participants in Network 2, with the operation of their cross-school action research groups. This was the only network studied to have established ‘overlapping’ groups, comprising participants from different schools. Some action research groups had brought together participants from different schools to collaborate on a predefined issue. But this was not always believed to be a successful model as the group lacked the shared experience and common understanding achieved by colleagues in the same school and this led to the failure of some groups to sustain momentum, or to the withdrawal of some action researchers, because they failed to see a benefit for their organisation.

Rather than starting with a focus for action research, other groups in Network 2 first developed relationships through sustained dialogue, informed by conducting visits to each other's schools from which common areas of interests were explored and a common focus for action research established. This involved developing a group of previously disparate individuals into a collaborative community, a slower process than clustering around a predetermined topic but, where it was given the opportunity to run its course, one described as being more successful. This is consistent with literature which suggests that the development of networks is time consuming (Pennell & Firestone, 1996; Sachs, 2000). It also supports the suggestion that communities arise within networks as a result of developing dialogue between individual participants (Kärkkäinen, 2000).

Community formation in Networks 1 and 3, the two networks to have adopted the within-school nested approach to organising action research, had different interpretations from that described in Network 2. Being based in member schools meant that, in the eyes of some participants from Network 3, the success of the action research groups was reliant on the strength and cohesion of the school communities in which they were located. In keeping with the discussion above, it was the extent to which members of that community were able to engage in meaningful, purposeful dialogue that was believed to have the biggest effect on the potential success of action research groups.

Dialogue between participants is seen, both in Network 2 and 3, as a precondition of the successful networking of action research. In Network 2, engaging in dialogue was seen as a central part of the process of developing communities of action researchers and so was a stage in the process of developing networked action research. In Network 3, the extent to which individuals in existing school communities could engage in dialogue was seen as a potential limitation on the adopted of networked action research. This echoes the concerns, raised by Earl et al (2006), about the extent of involvement and the effects of networks.

The extent to which members of a community could engage in productive dialogue with each other had, therefore, also been seen as a limitation on potential networking. However, networked action research was not believed to be solely dependent on the

nature of the school community in which it was adopted. It was also believed to be formative of those communities. In this regard, participants from both Network 1 and 3 identified that their within-school action research groups had the potential to influence the nature of the community of the school in which they were based, in doing so increasing participation in network action research through extending dialogue, a process similarly emphasised by Darling-Hammond et al. (1995).

This interest in community formation emphasises the practical application of a difference between the aspirations of participatory interventions with the two other areas of literature reviewed, i.e. action research and educational networks. Firstly, the application of participatory interventions can be seen as discrete interventions in which communities are identified, and then supported through participatory processes, by a researcher acting as facilitator (Park, 1999). The action research conducted in the three case study networks, however, was located in the working contexts of participants, albeit supported through process facilitation (as discussed in section 1 of this chapter). This raised issues of community in three senses:

- Firstly, in questioning the ways in which networks encouraged participation from different members of school communities, and the extent to which this participation is spread (Earl et al., 2006).
- Secondly, in the ways in which networked action research is dependent on the nature of the communities in which it is located.
- Thirdly, that the application of action research in networks can itself stimulate the development of communities amongst participants, which can extend through them to others in their schools.

In each of these networks, the interaction between network and community is characterised by being located in the working contexts of participants, rather than being treated as a separate intervention. However, despite locating networked action research in member schools, the issues of community emerging from these networks did not explicitly include engaging with communities external to those schools, an aspiration of the Networked learning Communities programme (NCSL, 2004a; West-Burnham & O'Sullivan, 1998).

### ***Theme 3: developing collaborative relationships in action research networks***

The issue of community formation, discussed above, is concerned, in part, with the ways in which networks stimulate collaborative relationships. Two aspects of this are explored in this section. The first concerns the development of collaboration in a climate of competition, and the second examines the notion of relationships in networks and how these relate to collaboration.

#### **Developing and spreading collaboration in a climate of competition**

Networks are believed to allow the development of collaborative relationships in contexts where competitive education policies have tended to encourage separation of staff (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996). With specific relevance to this thesis, the Networked Learning Communities programme was believed to enable staff from different schools to collaborate in a context where competitive measures, such as comparative tables of school performance and parental choice, had recently prevented this from happening (Jackson, 2002, 2006). Networks are believed to promote collaboration both between staff within the same school (in particular emphasised by Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996), and between staff from different schools (emphasised by Jackson, 2002). Both of these were explicitly articulated by the Networked Learning Group, which identified within-school and between-school activities as two of their 'levels of learning' (NCSL, 2006b).

The potential for networks to encourage collaboration was an issue emphasised by participants in all three case studies, who said that their network had either provided them with the chance to engage in dialogue, and ultimately collaborate with other local schools, or that it had the potential to do this, and so was an attractive proposition. In these discussions, it was felt that this form of collaboration had previously been prevented as a result of a period of accountability and scrutiny, which created local competition between schools, in doing so placing a particular emphasis on the potential for their networks to stimulate collaboration between schools.

Whilst stimulating collaboration between schools was seen as an attractive feature of the networks, participants also indicated ways in which networks stimulated

collaboration within schools. These differed according to the approach towards networking action research adopted by the networks. The nested approach, adopted by Networks 1 and 3, was initially concerned with promoting within-school collaboration, as the basis upon which to develop the opportunities for contact between the groups from different schools. In these networks, participants emphasised the importance of ensuring that their within-school action research groups were a part of the operation of the school, rather than a separate process disconnected from school management and structures. This echoes the view that the effects of collaborative networks are enhanced by linking them with broader systematic change efforts (Harris & Chrispeels, 2006).

Basing network activity within member schools also provided a challenge, as the work conducted by collaborative action research groups was then subject to the accountability features of the respective schools and their associated performance management mechanisms. This is a concern raised by Harris and Chrispeels (2006) and Hargreaves (2004), who believed that the influence of competitive accountability had been underestimated. This issue arose in a number of ways. Headteachers described a tension between ensuring that the action research groups in their schools were productive and providing benefits for their school, and giving these groups sufficient freedom to conduct work of their own choice, without excessive interference from the headteachers themselves, which might contravene the ownership of group members. This led some schools in Network 2 to withdraw from the network because of a perceived lack of benefit from their involvement.

In Network 3, the influence of accountability measures had a different effect, as judgements on teaching performance were used to identify who would participate in the collaborative action research aspects of the network. Specifically, this involved identifying 'low performing' practitioners and bringing them together with the intention that they collaborate with more effective teachers, and with the aspiration that this would result in an improvement in the quality of their practice. In this network, at least initially, rather than using the collaborative stimulus of the network to challenge the competitive accountability processes referred to by Lieberman & Grolnick (1996) and Jackson (2002, 2006), the collaborative relationships of the

network were based upon competitive accountability processes, resulting in the highest level of compulsion of any of the three networks studied.

However, whilst this might have been the case at the inception of Network 3, the development of the network was described by participants as being based around extending the opportunities for involvement of staff in collaborative action research. This was linked to a shift in the roles and relationships of the initial participants, from subjects of change, to facilitators of the action research being conducted collaboratively by other network members. Participants in Network 1 also spoke about spreading participation in action research groups. One way of achieving this involved establishing a rotation of group membership to ensure that the collaborative action research groups involved as many staff as possible over time. A further way of involving more staff in the action research groups in Network 1 was to relate the action research to school management practices, such as the school development plans and staff meetings. This was believed to ensure that the action research was directly related to the operation and development of the school and therefore was relevant to all members of staff and not restricted to the work of a limited group or volunteers.

These issues seem to relate directly to the concerns raised by Earl et al. (2006) in their study of the Manitoba Schools Improvement Partnership. In this study, the authors suggested that many schools failed to extend the practices of collaboration beyond the immediate group of network members. The aspiration, noted above, to relate the collaborative action research groups to school management, was believed, by some participants, to provide a mechanism by which other members of school communities could become involved in the network, for example by building this work into school development plans and devoting meeting time to collaborative action research. In some schools this resulted in an approach where the entire staff became members of the collaborative action research group with the aspiration that spreading collaboration throughout the school would mean networked action research would be neither an elitist pursuit, nor limited to only a few areas of the school.

Collaboration is also an important, albeit problematic, feature of action research (Feldman, 1999; Waters-Adams, 1994). The differing nature of collaboration in action research is emphasised by Holter & Schwartz-Barcott (1993), who identified a



three stage typology of action research, which were distinguished, in part, by the extent of collaboration. In the second level, collaboration was limited to collaboration between individual participants, in the third it was extended to communities, a commonly articulated aspiration of action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Heron, 1996).

All three networks studied for this thesis seemed to have established collaborative action research at the second level, in which collaboration is based around small groups. This seemed to have been the limit of collaboration in Network 2, in which small cross-school groups was the uniform approach to networking action research (termed ‘overlapping’ above). In Networks 1 and 3, which adopted a nested approach to networking action research, some member schools then aspired to develop wider involvement across the school from these limited groups, thus achieving a transfer from level 2 to level 3. This seemed to be an opportunity that was especially associated with this nested model as the groups could naturally expand within the organisation, something that was more difficult to do in cross-school, overlapping, action research groups.

The ability to extend involvement in groups nested in network schools was believed to depend partly on the extent to which the collaborative action research groups were related to school management structures and processes, and partly on the collaborative culture of the school itself. Participants in Network 3 referred to this as being associated with school culture. Where the existing culture was believed to be collaborative and supportive, action research was spread throughout the school, with the initial pair of action researchers ultimately taking on the role of facilitators. In other cases, where collaboration had not spread, the selection of action researchers had been based on the qualities of those members of staff and on their leadership potential, and so other staff had been excluded from participating, as they were not believed to have the aspired qualities. This raises further questions about participation, as it seemed that some individuals were intentionally selected for participation in the network based on judgements of personal qualities and how they fitted the aspired cultural nature of the network.

## **Collaboration and the nature of network relationships**

There was an additional consequence, to those noted above, of basing collaborative action research groups or pairs within the same organisation. In networking literature, distinctions are made between strong ties, which are referred to as being close, clearly defined and regulated relationships and weak ties which are informal relationships and hence less regulated. The implications of the differing 'strength' of relationships was examined in the work of Granovetter (1973), who concluded that 'weak' ties had more influence on innovatory change than strong ties. The 'nested' action research groups in Networks 1 and 3 comprised staff within the same school. These groups not only had greater opportunities to meet and collaborate, than cross school groups, but also had, in most cases, existing, strong, relationships (or ties) to draw on as groups were based around staff who were already working together.

In contrast to the nested approach of Networks 1 and 3, Network 2 established collaborative action research groups which drew members from different schools, thus establishing overlapping groups. This approach had the benefit of systemically arranging communication between different schools as a part of the action research process, something which had been identified as being more limited in Networks 1 and 3. However, it also had challenges as these group members did not have the same extent of common understanding to draw upon as those in the other two networks studied (but in particular in Network 1). Thus, these cross school collaborative groups were initially formed around a series of weak ties with participants having no existing relationships to draw from. Perhaps, as a result, participants in Network 2 were more concerned both with ensuring that action research was relevant to their school, and also with relationship building between action research group members, than those in Networks 1 or 3, where action research groups were related to school priorities by design and in which group members had either existing working relationships to draw from, or the benefit of developing those relationships within the same school. In other words this questions the extent to which the development of these networks related to the existing network of social relations of participants.

In this regard, the concern with developing relationships through networks is consistent with Lieberman's (2000) findings in which relationships both arose from,

and were the basis for, collaboration. The nature of these networks, and their priorities for development, depended on the strength and regularity of the relationships (or ties) of network members. This process was described by Jackson (2002), in specific reference to the Networked learning Communities, as being about strengthening weak relationships or, to 'tighten the loose coupling'. In this regard, members of Network 2 emphasised the importance of building relationships as a part of the process for collaborative action research.

The process of developing collaborative action research groups seemed to have followed a number of steps in the cross-school groups of Network 2. This started with sharing and developing mutual understanding, through identifying shared objectives, to collaborating on the conduct of action research. This has parallels with other studies of networks which suggest that collaboration develops through stages which are initially based around the transfer of perceptions and knowledge (Pennell & Firestone, 1996; Sachs, 2000). However, this phased development of collaborative action research is believed to be a time consuming process, and participants from Network 2 described how they had withdrawn from cross-school collaborative group because of a perceived lack of progress, echoing the view that participatory change emerges from sustained activity, and cannot be achieved as rapidly as some policy makers might desire (Goodman, 2001; Greenwood et al., 1993). This withdrawal was also attributed to the requirements of the school in question to address priorities born from the accountability process, which were not best served by a sustained focus on relationship building, in doing so echoing the very concerns raised by Harris and Chrispeels (2006) and Hargreaves (2004), that the separating influences of school competition had been underestimated.

The strength of networks based in groups comprised entirely of participants from the same school was that they had existing relationships to draw upon, thus embedding the network in strong ties. The challenge was that, in being based in the institutional expectations of these regulated relationships, these strong ties could limit the extent to which collaboration could result in change drawn from the participants' own agendas, not those of their organisation. In contrast, cross-school collaborative groups had the benefit of systematically developing relationships between schools but lacked the strength of existing relationships to draw upon.

#### ***Theme 4: voluntarism, participation and ownership over change***

Two notions of participation are evident in this thesis. The first concerns questions about how people participate in networks, raising issues about how individuals associate with the principles and operation of their network. The second concerns the ways in which networks enabled participants to influence change in their working contexts. In other words, the first concerns *participation in networks*, the second *participation through networks*. The intention, in participatory research, is that these two features complement each other, i.e. this approach is participatory inasmuch as it enables participants to take ownership of the process of the intervention (Pratt & Loizos, 1992), of related research (Levin, 1999), and of any outcomes resulting from research (Park, 1999).

The approach of the case study networks to arranging participation had a number of features, first in providing a mechanism by which schools could join the networks, secondly in providing opportunities for individuals in those schools to become involved, and thirdly in identifying meaningful topics for change, which would then have an influence on the work of individuals, schools and the network as a whole.

The decision whether or not to take part, and the freedom to decide a focus for development, are also features of all three areas of literature examined in chapter 2, namely action research, networks and participatory interventions. Educational networks can be considered as participatory inasmuch as they are intended to support network members in having a significant part to play in their own immediate professional settings, i.e. enabling participation through the network (Jackson, 2006; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Pennell & Firestone, 1996).

Participants in all three networks spoke of the potential that their network had for enabling them to change their own practice, an aspiration which was specifically contrasted against the imposition of government policy. This provides the background against which issues of ownership, participation and voluntarism are explored. In particular, this is done through an exploration of two potential tensions that participants in this research seemed to perceive in relation to their network. The

first describes a tension between individual ownership of change and aspirations for ‘improvement’, and the second between voluntarism and representation in networks.

### **Aspirations for improvement and ownership of change**

Two of the three networks studied had explicitly identified overarching aspirations associated with accountability measures and resulting improvement agendas. Network 2 had identified an aspiration to reinvigorate a process of improvement in pupil performance, which had recently stalled in member schools, whilst Network 3 took this a step further in identifying a particular subject area which needed to be improved and which, therefore, targeted involvement at a particular group of practitioners. As a result, the numbers of participants indicating that they had been instructed to become involved in networked action research (and thus had not volunteered) was far higher in Network 3 than in the other networks, with 50% of participants indicating that they had been directed to be involved with enquiry, in contrast with 12% in Network 2 and 4% of participants in Network 1 (just 1 of 23 participants).

This compulsion on individuals to participate in Network 3 seems to contradict the aspirations of action research, networks and participatory intervention that participants should volunteer to take part (see, respectively: Day & Townsend, 2009; Maguire, 1987). It also seems to contradict the aspirations noted above, that networks are intended to give participants a chance to examine and develop practice, free from the constraints of policy and, specifically, free from the separating pressures of competitive accountability (Jackson, 2006; Lieberman, 2000). But basing elements of networks around the accountability aspects of schools did not seem to have prevented collaborative development in the ways that had been described by some authors (Hargreaves, 2004; Harris & Chrispeels, 2006). Indeed, it seems that participants in all networks, including those in which accountability measures had been at the forefront of their justification for networking, had been able to identify issues of interest to themselves and to explore them collaboratively.

Irrespective of the accountability aspects of networks, participants in all networks also described their work as being ‘bottom up’, as exemplified in the introductory

document for Network 2, and practitioner led, in keeping with the aspirations of educational networks (Darling-Hammond et al., 1995; Pennell & Firestone, 1996). The networks studied seemed to have integrated improvement agendas with their participant-led work, exemplified by participants who described that their own aspirations happened to be the same as initiatives derived from government policy, and others who suggested that initiatives derived from networked action research had pre-dated policy driven changes with the same aspirations. One illustration of this is the pupil voice activities of Network 1 which was believed to have resulted from network activity and was perceived, by Participant 6, to have pre-dated national education policy addressing the same issues.

This relationship between networked action research and policy is not a complete separation between the two, as suggested in some texts, but seems more akin to the suggestion that involvement in a network can provide a framework through which participants can interpret policy in their practice (Pennell & Firestone, 1996). The potential tension, therefore, between the politically-driven improvement agendas and the aspiration for ownership of change, was mediated by network members interrogating the meaning of improvement in respect of their own interests, rather than deferring to a definition of improvement forced upon them.

In the literature, networks are believed to provide flexible systems through which practice can be developed in ways which are more sensitive to local contexts, something that generalised bureaucratic systems are not able to achieve (Jackson, 2006; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996). Participants in this research did not refer explicitly to the flexible qualities of networks in reference to their ability to cope with change. However, all three networks identified flexible systems in other ways. Flexibility in Network 1, and in the later developments in Network 3, had been extended freedom for participants to identify their own focus. Flexibility had also been established in allowing schools to adopt different approaches to organising their within-school action research groups. These varied across schools in both Networks 1 and 3 and were related, by participants, to the differing contexts and aspirations of participants of those schools.

The flexibility for participants to identify their own areas for change, and for schools to identify their own approaches to action research (in the nested approaches of Networks 1 and 3), emphasises just one aspect of that noted in the networking literature. The flexibility of the case study networks was intended to cope with the range of interests of individual participants and a range of approaches to action research felt most suitable by individual schools. This is a form of flexibility related to recognising and coping with diversity, and does not refer to the flexibility to cope with change emphasised in network literature. It may be that the flexibility to manage a diverse range of participants can provide the same basis for flexibility to cope with societal change. What it did achieve, however, was the opportunity for participants to make sense of their networked action research in relation to their own working contexts, in doing so further emphasising that these networks were based, or located, in the contexts of participants.

The potential tension between practices and knowledge imposed from outside the network, and the ownership of participants, seemed to have been mediated by providing participants with the freedom to identify issues relevant to them and to deal with those issues in ways which suited their purpose. However, whilst this flexibility allowed for individuals to deal with issues meaningful to them, a second tension concerns how this work might be related to the wider work of other network members. This tension, between participation and representation, is explored in the section below.

### **The tension between participation and representation**

As noted above, the ways in which the action research aspects of networks were organised differed in each of the case studies conducted for this thesis. These were described as being either ‘nested’ or ‘overlapping’ approaches to networking action research. This section explores a tension in the ways in which these groups were organised, and how they related to the aspirations for them to be representative of a wider community, whilst retaining the voluntary principles of participation which, as noted in the previous section, is a feature of the literature on networks, action research and participatory interventions.

The nested approach adopted by Network 1 was for each member school to identify a group of action researchers from within the staff. Participants in these schools voiced concerns that the group might become separated from the work of the rest of the school. Accordingly, many of these schools then adopted strategies to ensure that this work was spread. Some did so by rotating group membership, thus giving more people a chance to be involved, others did so by selecting staff to represent their colleagues, for example identifying one member of staff from each year group teaching team. Others explored ways to involve all members of staff in the action research group; in some this involved making action research a part of common activity related to school management processes, such as staff meetings, for others the approach was to identify a small group who then led all staff through the process of action research, whilst in others action research was a standing item in school meetings to which all staff were expected, and believed, to contribute.

The other network to adopt a nested approach was Network 3 but, in this case, rather than establishing groups, each school initially identified a pair of action researchers to work together, with the intention that one of the pair, in particular, would benefit from the process. There was, however, a similar interest in spreading beyond this initial group in some schools, with participants describing how involvement in action research was being spread beyond the original pair, who then became facilitators. Indeed, in some schools in Network 3, as in those in Network 1, the aspiration was to extend involvement in action research to all staff.

Participants in these two networks, therefore, seemed concerned with the extent to which participation in action research had, or could be, spread. One aspect of this concerned how to make the action research representative of the interests of all staff. The development of voluntary groups is entirely consistent with the voluntary aspirations of networks identified above. However, the alternative strategies of intentionally selecting participants to be representative of a wider staff, and involving all staff in action research, both seem to provide a challenge to these voluntary principles by either intentionally picking staff or involving everyone, thus limiting or removing the opportunity for individuals not to be involved. However, participants were still keen to emphasise that there was a consultative and voluntary feature to selected groups, and to the involvement of all staff in action research groups. This



suggests a tension between retaining the voluntary principles of networks (Day & Townsend, 2009; Lieberman, 2000; Maguire, 1987) whilst encouraging the participation of all community members, as advocated by Reason and Bradbury (2001a).

There was a pragmatic justification for the involvement of community members in participatory interventions. By involving those individuals, the understanding of the context is enhanced and the subsequent actions more relevant (this is the instrumental justification of Schafft & Greenwood, 2003). This aspiration echoes the interest in participation and representation noted in Networks 1 and 3, which had adopted a 'nested' approach by basing groups of action researchers within member schools.

The cross-school action research approach of Network 2 raised other issues. At its inception, Network 2 sought to give all staff some form of voice over the issues addressed by the network, and so embarked on a process of consultation (which is regarded as being tokenistic by Arnstein, 1969). This involved asking all staff in network schools to identify the issues that they thought should be addressed, initially through dialogue at a network conference, and then through a questionnaire which asked participants to identify the issue of most relevant to them, from a possible list<sup>16</sup>. The problem was that, in doing so, the cross-school action research groups had less freedom to define their own work collectively. Indeed those action research groups that reported most success had abandoned this prescriptive approach to focus, initially, on relationship building with the focus for change emerging from this process.

These strategies relate to criticisms made of participatory interventions, which suggest that the application of some participatory approaches can fail to achieve the ownership and representation that they aspire to (Holland & Blackburn, 1998). In some cases, this is believed to be because participation in the process of change is not necessarily spread beyond groups of participants to other members of the community

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<sup>16</sup> N.B. there was also evidence of consultative mechanisms in the other networks but not in the same, network-wide systemic sense noted in Network 2. In contrast, the flexibility afforded to member schools to identify their own ways of organising their within-school action research meant that this issue varied between schools and so the issue of consultation varied much more in these networks, emerging as an overarching concern that individual schools were tackling differently according to their own approach to action research.

in question (Kamali, 2007). The representative intentions of participatory interventions can also make assumptions about the community involved. By identifying a small group to be representative of the community as a whole, assumptions are made that the community in question is harmonious (Mohan, 2001) and homogenous (Wallerstein, 1999).

These assumptions, which have been a criticism of participatory interventions, seem less applicable to the networks studied. Participants in all three networks reported aspirations to spread involvement through member schools, thus intending to involve as many of the community in question as possible, whilst also providing flexibility to allow considerable variations in approaches to suit individual contexts. This approach, rather than assuming homogeneity, provided flexibility for variation in choices of issue and, by involving as many individuals as possible, did not assume that any participants needed to 'represent' other members of the same community. However, there were aspirations for representation and the challenge, in involving as many members of the community as possible, or in adopting representative approaches, seemed to be how they could retain the voluntary principles which participants identified as being so important to them and which concurred with the literature around participatory interventions.

### ***Theme 5: leadership and networked action research***

The fifth theme concerns leadership and action research networks. One of the aspirations of participatory interventions is to challenge existing hierarchies (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995), including leadership. However, this does not necessarily mean a complete rejection of leadership, but rather is a challenge which has led to the development of what has been referred to as participatory approaches to leadership and management (Plas, 1996).

As noted above, the networks studied here were located in member schools and this led, in part, to a consideration of the ways in which networks related to the existing practices of the organisations in question, which included the leadership of those organisations. This interest in Leadership is also consistent with the literature on educational networks. For example, Lieberman and Grolnick's (1996) study of

educational networks in the USA described these networks as providing opportunities for participants to take leadership positions which differ from those normally provided in educational institutions, but which can provide alternative experiences of leadership from those provided through standard school structures.

This section outlines two features of leadership arising from the three case studies of action research networks. The first concerns the role of existing school leaders in the network, and the second relates to other leadership issues that have arisen through the networks.

### **Networks and the leadership of member organisations**

The headteachers of member schools had a large part to play in the inception, and in the accountability aspects of the networks. In part, this was derived from the NCSL's requirement that the headteachers and governors of all member institutions of applicant networks should sign contracts indicating their adherence to the expectations of the programme, but it was also related to the ways in which the NCSL first conceptualised these networks. The educational policy context was explicitly recognised in the design of these networks, aspiring to encourage collaboration between schools forced apart by competitive policies (Jackson, 2002) whilst also using school performance as one judgement of network effects (Crowe et al., 2006). These issues of competition, derived from accountability processes and school performance, both directly concern school leadership and management. The Networked Learning Communities programme also explicitly emphasised school leadership by identifying 'leadership learning' as one of the six levels of learning in the programme (Jackson, 2006; NCSL, 2006b) and against which networks were required to report.

The role of appointed leaders arose as an issue in all three networks. In Network 1, the commitment of the headteacher was seen as having a direct effect on school involvement in the network, as the most commonly attributed cause of schools leaving the network was related to a change in headteacher. The influence of the senior leaders in member schools was, however, believed to go beyond decisions of network membership, as senior leaders were also perceived as being influential in

enabling the school to make the most of its involvement in the network. This emerged as a particular issue in Network 3, in which the attitudes of the headteacher towards the networks were suggested (by participants 1 and 3 in particular) to be directly related to the success, or otherwise, of its adoption in individual schools.

Headteacher participants were sensitive to the influence that they could have over networked action research. They reported feeling a responsibility for supporting the action research groups, and in giving them sufficient freedom to operate without excessively intervening in their work in ways which might compromise the ownership aspirations of the network. In an earlier section in this chapter, this role was described as being facilitatory, a role familiar in the literature on networks (Wohlstetter et al., 2003) and equated with that of the researcher in participatory interventions and in some forms of action research (Holland & Blackburn, 1998; Levin, 1999).

The principle of ownership, which underpins the facilitatory role of headteachers, was also consistent with literature around networks (Veugelers & Zijlstra, 2002), action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a) and participatory interventions (Gaventa, 1993; Schafft & Greenwood, 2003). However, this facilitatory role created a tension for some headteachers who felt that, whilst they were obliged to reduce their interventions in the work of the action research groups (to retain ownership), they were also required, as leaders of the school, to ensure that it had relevance for their organisation and led to meaningful outcomes. This was most extreme in Network 2, where participants explained that their school had withdrawn from the network because of a perceived lack of benefit for them in being members.

However, limiting the influence of headteachers was not the only consideration for school leadership and the conduct of networked action research. Indeed, some participants saw the involvement of their school in networked action research as a way to identify and nurture potential leaders, in much the same way as described by Lieberman and Wood (2003) in their study of the National Writing Project network in the USA. Rather than providing a way to ‘sidestep institutional hierarchies’ (Sachs, 2000), these networks were taking them into account and attempting to integrate them into the work of the network.

Further evidence of this involvement of school leaders came from questionnaire data. Headteachers were well represented in the participant profiles of each network and were identified as being active members of the action research aspects of the networks. Indeed, as noted in the 'communities' section of this chapter, separate action research groups were established for headteachers. In addition to the involvement of headteachers, middle managers had also been involved as members of action research groups or pairings, with large number of participants identifying themselves as having some middle management responsibility in their school. It seemed, therefore, that appointed leaders had been active members in the action research features of the networks. Responses to the questionnaire also suggested that, in each of the networks, school senior management teams were kept informed of the progress of other action research groups of which they were not members.

The above discussion suggests that networks interrelated with existing leadership positions in several ways, including: involving; informing; being supported by and developing appointed leaders. However, this was not the only issue of leadership raised by these networks and each of the case studies also raised issues beyond those relating to formal leadership positions. These issues are explored in the following section.

### **Leadership and the conduct of networked action research**

Various studies of networks have identified that they provide opportunities for formal leadership positions in addition to those in participating schools (Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Pennell & Firestone, 1996). In some respects, the Networked Learning Communities programme achieved this by design as each member network was required to identify two co-leaders who had the main responsibility for leading the network and for reporting on their work to the National College for School Leadership (NCSL).

However, leadership roles were extended beyond co-leadership in networks studied for this thesis. Network 1, which had adopted a nested approach by establishing groups of action researchers in member schools, identified coordinators for each of

the within-school action research groups (termed SIG). They also appointed a network facilitator to coordinate SIG coordinators from member schools and to oversee other features of the network. Network 2 had also established network leadership provision with the establishment, not only of the mandatory co-leaders, but also of a network-wide steering group. In the case of Network 2, members of the steering group were given the role of action research group coordinators with each, cross school, action research group being allocated one member of the steering group to oversee and support their work.

Thus, both Network 1 and Network 2 established overarching steering groups for the network and identified specific individuals to take the role of action research group coordinators. In Network 1, these roles were grown from the within-school action research groups themselves, i.e. each group identified a coordinator and that coordinator then automatically became a member of the SIG coordinators group, whilst in Network 2 the coordinating group had been established first and then allocated to action research groups as facilitators.

Network 3, which had adopted a nested model for networking action research, had initially, identified pairs of action researchers to work together, in contrast to Networks 1 and 2, both of which had tended to identify bigger groups of action researchers. In Network 3, following the first year of operation, leadership roles were identified for the initial action research pairs from each school. These 14 individuals (two in each of the seven member schools) were then tasked with spreading action research in their organisation by taking on the role of facilitators themselves, a role that had previously been fulfilled by an external consultant and managed centrally through seminars held for all action research pairs. This evolution of the facilitatory role, from external to internal, is similar to the informal leadership identified by Lieberman and Wood (2003) in their study of the National Writing Project.

In addition to the creation of more opportunities for participants to take up leadership roles, formally and informally, the conduct of networked action research appeared to be of benefit for leaders themselves. This is evidenced both in the establishment of headteacher action research groups (in Networks 1 and 2) but also in the views of participants, for example in Network 3, who felt that networked action research could

provide a way of identifying, and then developing, potential leaders. Whilst this echoes the position of participatory approaches to leadership (Plas, 1996), it also explicitly illustrates the aspiration of the Networked Learning Communities, to enhance leadership learning through these networks (Jackson, 2006; NCSL, 2006b).

## **Overview**

This chapter provides an overview of the interaction of issues emerging from the case study chapters, and from insights emerging from the literature review. The themes identified above provide a series of perspectives on the networks studied and how their operation relates to participatory interventions. These networks also shared one particular feature, namely they were all based around the conduct of action research. What the themes identified in this chapter emphasise is that these networks tended to be rooted in the practices, aspirations and perspectives of participants in member schools. In instigating a network, the aspiration had been to support participants in developing their practice and contexts in ways meaningful to them. The networks, as noted above, provided opportunities for these participants to interrogate their own work and to develop and share, through the processes of networking and action research, knowledge especially relevant to them. This suggests that, in keeping with the aspirations of participatory interventions, these networks were enabling network members to interrogate their own contexts and to articulate this understanding to each other. It is through the provision of freedom for participants to identify their own specific areas of interest that the flexibility of these networks was most noticeable.

However, while there were many areas of commonality across these networks, there were areas of difference, emphasised above. Notably this included the nature of intervention in each. The common approach of participatory interventions (Brown & Tandon, 1983; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Goodman, 2001; Wallerstein, 1999) is to introduce a programme of development, emphasising community involvement, through the external agency of a researcher (facilitator). These networks differed as they were directing themselves, in doing so identifying roles for internal facilitators. As noted above, this was a strength, inasmuch as it ensured the work of the network was situated in the aspirations of its participant organisations, retaining ownership for participants rather than responding to an external stimulus for change. However, it

was also a challenge as it meant that the network was interpreted through the agendas of the institution in question. These issues, and the specific claims for knowledge associated with this thesis, are laid out more explicitly in the following, final, chapter.



## Chapter Eight: Conclusions

### *Overview of findings*

The previous chapter presented themes which emerged from issues arising from each of three case studies, linked to literature referring to networks, action research and participatory interventions. This outlined the outcomes of the case studies which highlighted how their approaches related to participatory interventions and from which the following outcomes emerged:

1. Networks arranged their action research groups in reference to member schools.
2. These networks were located in the requirements and operation of member schools. These related to issues of collaboration and networking within and between schools who were a part of the network.
3. Networks were perceived to provide communities with an opportunity to participate in a process of change but were also believed to stimulate the formation and development of communities.
4. The opportunity to take ownership of change was a common aspiration participants had of their network. Networks were perceived to provide the chance to identify areas of interest and develop those free from the influence of government policy.
5. In the networks studied, external and internal facilitation was focussed on supporting participants through the process of change and not in legislating about what ways practices should change.
6. Networking of action research was closely related to relationships between participants. These provided a basis for mutual understanding and established a foundation of working practices. Where participants did not have existing working relationships to draw from, the development of relationships through dialogue was believed to be an important phase towards productive networking.
7. In devising and implementing strategies for networking action research, participants were dealing with tensions between participation and representation and between ownership and policy informed improvement

aspirations. These arose from the relationship between the networks and the schools around which they were based.

8. Issues of leadership also arose as an issue in three senses. The first concerned the perceived influence of appointed school leaders on networked action research; the second identified formal leadership opportunities resulting from these networks and, the third explored the informal leadership elements of networks.

The conduct of this research was based around a series of research questions, which are discussed in the following section.

### ***Answering the research questions***

This thesis was based around a single overarching research question, namely:

#### **In what ways can action research networks in education be considered participatory?**

This overarching question identified the relationships between action research, networks and participatory interventions and it was intended that these three areas of literature would provide a conceptual and empirical basis to this work. This had a number of additional questions:

1. How do the aspirations of action research and of educational networks match those of participatory interventions?
2. In what ways are these aspirations realised in practice?
3. What part does action research play in the participatory aspects of networks?
4. How are networks organised and arranged, and how does this relate to the potential for them to act a participatory structures?
5. How do networks relate to existing processes and structures? What are the implications for participatory aspirations of this relationship? In what ways have members engaged with the network and to what extent has this involvement been able to change the way that the network is organised and has operated?
6. In what ways has involvement in this network supported changes achieved by participants in their professional context? Is it possible to ascribe these changes to any particular features of the network?

The issues drawn from an analysis of the network case studies, individually and collectively, relate to the research questions in the following ways:

*Question 1: how do the aspirations of action research and of educational networks match those of participatory interventions?*

The three relevant areas of literature, of action research, networks and participatory interventions, share not only a common reference to Kurt Lewin but also a number of common arguments. All three have an action orientation and are intended to be a stimulus for change. All aspire that this change is derived from the interests of participants, and all share in contrasting this origin of change with the imposition of policy. They also share in a common principle to be based around the production of knowledge relating to participants' own contexts.

Each area also raises issues of community, although the notion of community differs between them. These vary from the geographically defined, social communities, in some forms of action research and participatory interventions, and practice based communities, of interest especially to educational networks and other applications of action research. This thesis supports these areas of overlap as the case study participants saw the aspirations of action research to be synonymous with their network, and to be concerned with providing opportunities for them to develop and understand practices free from the imposition of policy. Nonetheless there were some differences between the claims of networking, action research and participatory intervention literature and the work of the networks themselves, for example in the interpretations of community and, most especially in the integration, rather than rejection (as would be more associated with participatory approaches) of quality standards derived from policy.

*Question 2: in what ways are these aspirations realised in practice?*

A consistent feature of all networks was their aspiration to promote participant-led change, in doing so echoing the aspirations of all three areas of literature examined above. The interest in community participation was also enacted by participants in these networks as communities were identified, and their involvement in and through the network supported through different, albeit related, mechanisms. However, there were concerns about the influence that communities, which were defined by their roles in schools, could have on each other related to those roles. In keeping with the

participatory literature, participants also outlined how they believed their action research network would provide them with the opportunity to achieve change of relevance to them, free from the constraints of national governmental policy.

*Question 3: What part does action research play in the participatory aspects of networks?*

Each of the three networks had been selected because of their adoption of action research and so this question cannot be answered in comparison with networks with differing processes. But these case studies did provide illustrations of how action research can be networked and an understanding of the participatory features of action research networks. In all three cases, action research was seen and applied as the means by which individuals could participate in the network. In addition, the aspirations of network members were that this would result in change resulting from the interests of participants. Therefore, action research was seen as the means by which individuals could participate in and through the network. This research also highlighted the importance of facilitatory roles in each of the three networks. However, this facilitation role, which was directly related to the conduct of action research, was different from the approach described in participatory interventions, and was itself a means for participation with individuals from within the network taking facilitatory roles, in some cases replacing the facilitation provided by external consultants.

*Question 4: How are networks organised and arranged, and how does this relate to the potential for them to act a participatory structures?*

The three networks studied had applied network-wide action research in a variety of ways. These were outlined as belonging to one of two contrasting approaches, namely 'nested', where action research is conducted within member schools, and 'overlapping', where action research is arranged across member schools. Neither approach were judged as being more effective than the other, at achieving participation, but were viewed as contrasting approaches, with distinctive benefits and problems. In both models, there were examples of participants who had attributed

change to the network and this change was related to opportunities that the network had provided to identify and deal with issues, free from the imposed practices and judgements associated with government policy.

*Question 5: How do networks relate to existing processes and structures? What are the implications for participatory aspirations of this relationship? In what ways have members engaged with the network and to what extent has this involvement been able to change the way that the network is organised and has operated?*

This question concerns the relationships between the network, existing structures and processes, and the aspirations of participants. These networks were brought together with: the consent of headteachers; a requirement to establish co-leaders and an expectation to report the success of the network in relation to pupil and school performance in standardised tests. These networks were, therefore, inextricably linked to the operation of schools. This was perceived to be a difference from participatory interventions, which tended to be based around discrete interventions, without the same degree of association with the context in question. This locating of these developments in working contexts had mixed effects, being a benefit inasmuch as it meant that the network was dealing directly with the practical concerns of participants, and a challenge because the network was based upon practices and relationships defined and judged according to the accountability expectations of schools.

Whilst the network processes seemed focussed on creating a link between the network and the practical contexts of schools, there was less evidence of how participants could be involved in influencing the organisation and operation of the network itself. The only exceptions to this concerned occasions when participants interpreted the aspirations of the network to suit their priorities, such as in devising ways to operate their own action research groups to meet their needs, or when participants took up leadership roles in networks, such as that of internal network facilitator. These networks were intended to be flexible to allow participants the opportunity to participate in a common activity but with a wide range of interests, and differing approaches to networking action research. Therefore, whilst there is little evidence of participants influencing the nature and operation of the network as a whole, the

flexibility of networks was exploited to allow participants to address issues of concern to them.

*Question 6: in what ways has involvement in this network supported changes achieved by participants in their professional context? Is it possible to ascribe these changes to any particular features of the network?*

One form of change to professional contexts resulting from these networks concerns the adoption of action research. Participants in all three networks spoke of aspirations to spread involvement in action research to include all staff in the school, thus involvement in action research was both a means of networking and an aspired outcome of the networks, including spreading involvement to wider groups of participants, principally pupils and non teaching staff. The conduct of these action researchers was related to the practical concerns of these participants, derived from their own working context, and so was associated with changes to practice in those working contexts. These networks were also believed to enhance the professional development of participants, including leadership development. However, instead of being seen as a way to challenge and overturn the operation of these professional contexts, the networks were perceived as ways to interpret and operate within those organisations in ways which met individual and collective areas of interest.

### ***Significance of this study***

This thesis is based around research of three networks, all of which were a part of the Networked Learning Communities programme. The core aspects of these networks were common, namely that they were based around action research conducted by network members. The aspiration of this research was to examine the participatory features of these networks. This section outlines the significance of this study in two senses, namely empirical significance and theoretical significance.

### **Empirical significance**

Three aspects of empirical significance are highlighted here concerning contributions to: an understanding of educational networks; of the part that action research can play in networks and in understanding the specific networking programme, the Networked

Learning communities, of which all three case study networks were part. These are explored in turn below.

### *Developing an understanding of educational networks*

The first area where this thesis claims to make an empirical contribution is in understanding educational networks in general. Definitions of networks vary (see for example: Clyde Mitchell, 1969b) but this thesis is concerned with organisational networks (O'Toole, 1997) , in particular in education, an area which is believed to be lacking a sufficient empirical basis (Harris & Chrispeels, 2006; Huberman, 1995). In examining educational networks, this research is contributing to the wider body of knowledge, including: studies which have been conducted internationally, for example in Canada, the USA, and Australia (see respectively: Earl et al., 2006; Lieberman, 2000; Sachs, 2000). This thesis contributes to this international literature through studies of networks in England. These networks were, therefore, developed in relation to the policy and accountability expectations of that system. Thus, this thesis contributes to a limited, but growing, range of studies based in the UK (see for example: Day & Townsend, 2007; Hadfield, 2005; McLaughlin et al., 2007).

This thesis, therefore, contributes to knowledge of educational networks, in particular those in the UK. As well as being identified as a limited area of study, the research conducted on educational networks has been criticised as being based mainly around single case studies (Huberman, 1995; Pennell & Firestone, 1996). This thesis responds to this through an examination of three networks. Whilst this is insufficient to make claims for generalisability, the comparative aspects of this thesis provide opportunities to examine issues arising from one case against the others.

There appears, from this thesis, to be a contradiction in the claims made of educational networks. They are generally intended to challenge policy and bureaucratic accountability processes but this work suggests that, in basing networks in educational contexts, they are, by design, associated with exactly those accountability processes. However, whilst this might appear a challenge to some networking literature, specifically that which contrasts networks directly with bureaucratic processes (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996), it does support other writing

which suggests that, rather than being a direct challenge, networks can provide a means for establishing dialogue, which allows the interrogation of policy in relation to the individual contexts, aspirations and perceptions of participants (Sachs, 2000). Educational networks, therefore, seem able to involve participants with diverse interests in ways which can retain a relevance to those contexts.

This participation and ownership in diverse situations, achieved without applying enforced foci or practices on participants, suggests that it is possible to retain a shared, overarching approach, whilst retaining individuality. This emphasises a form of flexibility which is believed to be a common quality of networks, as emphasised in international research (Lieberman & Wood, 2003). In providing evidence of how networks can achieve participation at the level of the individual participant, this thesis also suggests that networks are able to do so, whilst avoiding the assumptions of homogeneity or harmony which are a criticism of participatory approaches (Mohan, 2001; Wallerstein, 1999).

One feature of this attention to local contexts concerns the part that leadership plays in educational networks. This thesis specifically illustrated how networks involved and informed existing school leaders and how they had formal and informal leadership dimensions themselves, thus extending educational network research, which has made some limited reference to leadership (Lieberman & Wood, 2003), and contributing to more recent publications in which the leadership dimension is more explicit.

### ***The relationship between action research and networks***

This thesis makes a specific contribution to understanding networks, namely in examining the part that action research plays in these networks. The selection of the cases for this study was based around their adoption of action research and so they all shared in this feature of their work. Whilst there are examples of people who have related action research to networking (Foth, 2006; Posch, 1993), there are limited studies which specifically concern networking of action research in or across schools (Day & Hadfield, 2004; McLaughlin et al., 2007). This also distinguishes this thesis from a great deal of educational network literature, in which there is no mention of action research or in which action research might be mentioned more as a general



principle (Earl et al., 2006; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Pennell & Firestone, 1996; Sachs, 2000). This thesis, therefore, contributes to an understanding of both how action research can be organised in networks of schools, and how networking can be enhanced through action research.

This thesis has specifically highlighted, from three case studies, two overarching approaches to networking action research. These were described as being either 'nested', in which the action research groupings were based in member schools, or 'overlapping', in which the action research groupings contained individuals from different schools. In nested networks, schools were implicitly networked by engaging in the common process of identifying and supporting groups of action researchers. The more explicit, formal, aspects of networking then came in the events provided for these groups of action researchers to meet and to share their experiences of action research. In the overlapping approach of Network 2, action research was the means of networking. This was achieved by making action research groups comprise staff from different schools. Membership of these groups, therefore, involved staff from different schools networking through the process of action research.

The difference in these approaches is in the status of action research. In the nested approach, action research provides a common experience, which then provides a basis for discussion and 'networking'. In the overlapping approach, action research is the mechanism by which networking is achieved. This thesis, therefore, derives one aspect of its empirical significance from illustrating practical ways in which action research can be networked. It provides specific illustrations of a process which has not been demonstrated as explicitly in other literature referring to action research and networks. These have generally focussed, more often, on descriptions of action research networks (Day & Hadfield, 2004; Day & Townsend, 2009), or in contrasting different networks which have not explicitly identified the role of action research in acting as a networking process, and bridging between the social networks of schools, and the formal establishment of a wider network (McLaughlin et al., 2007). Specifically, this thesis illustrated the ways in which overlapping and nested approaches to networking action research relate to individuals and their schools and, from this, the benefits and challenges of each were identified.

### *Contributing to an understanding of the Networked Learning Communities*

The final feature of empirical significance refers to the contribution this thesis makes to understanding a specific networking programme, i.e. the Networked Learning Communities. This was believed to be the largest networking programme in the world (NCSL, 2005c, 2005e) and has resulted in a range of research, including a great deal published by the NCSL itself as a part of the programme (Earl & Katz, 2005), related to the programme but published elsewhere (Kubiak & Bertram, 2005), and publications written about the programme but conducted and published independently (Day & Townsend, 2007). Included within this body of literature are limited publications exploring the application of action research in these networks (McGregor et al., 2004; McLaughlin et al., 2007). In examining the application of action research forms of Networked Learning Communities, this thesis contributes to this last category of work, being research on networks that were a part of the Networked Learning Communities, doing so in relation to, but independent of, the programme itself. Furthermore, it contributes to a limited area of literature which explicitly examines action research based networks which were members of this programme (see for example: Day & Hadfield, 2004; McLaughlin et al., 2007).

The empirical aspects of this thesis suggest that the common features of the Networked Learning Communities programme had not prevented member networks from interpreting the initiative to suit their own purposes, reflecting a flexibility to establish their own distinctive approaches, a flexibility believed to be a quality of networks per se (Lieberman, 2000). This was believed to have been especially important to research participants, as it allowed individuals and schools to address issues of relevance to them without excessive external imposition. But further empirical evidence from these networks suggest that network members perceived a tension between their work and the accountability features of schools, suggesting that the Networked Learning Communities was not as successful in providing member networks with freedom from the accountability aspects of the programme as had been expected. It would also seem that the levels of learning described by the programme had relevance for participants, with the exception of the learning between different networks (Jackson, 2002; NCSL, 2006b). This thesis suggests, therefore, that the programme was relevant to the individual contexts of participants and their schools,

establishing contacts and collaboration between schools, but less successful in spreading this learning between networks.

### **Theoretical significance: understanding participatory change through networked action research**

This thesis is distinctive in that it brings together three differing conceptual areas, namely: action research, networks and participatory interventions. The interaction of two of these areas has been explored to a certain extent elsewhere. For example, as noted above, the application of action research through networks has been explored (Day & Hadfield, 2004; Hadfield, 2004) whilst the connection between participatory change and action research has also been examined, for example in Reason and Bradbury (2001b). There are, however, few explicit examinations of the relationship between networks and participatory change or, most significantly for this thesis, across the three domains of: networks; action research and participatory change. Examining the interaction of these three domains, in the practice of the three networks, is another respect in which this thesis can contribute new knowledge. Three particular contributions towards theoretical perspectives are outlined below, the first of which concerns the contextual relevance of networked action research.

#### ***The contextual relevance of networked action research***

The first contribution that this thesis makes to theoretical development concerns the ways in which networked action research are believed to relate to contexts. This is one area in which the participatory aspects of action research networks can be examined. The argument for participatory interventions is that they are based upon supporting participants in a process of change, linked to their understanding of their context (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2007; Schafft & Greenwood, 2003). This is also evident in literature referring to educational networks, which are believed to allow participants in educational communities to examine their own work, and to make changes based upon their understanding of their context (Pennell & Firestone, 1996), aspirations which are also shared with action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998; Winter, 1989). This thesis provides details of how these aspirations related to practice and, in doing so, informs an understanding of how the collective aspirations of networks, developed through action research, could be related to specific contexts of participants and member schools.

Participants in this research suggested that the networks of which they were a part provided a mechanism which respected the specific knowledge that they had of their institutions, colleagues, local communities and pupils, thus confirming that the propositions of the three areas of literature, of participatory interventions, action research and networks, had relevance to participants in case study networks. But this thesis highlighted a potential challenge to the contextual aspirations of these networks. This arose from the development of a shared agenda and process for networks, which might, from this collective endeavour, challenge the extent to which networks could address individual contextual interests of participants and their organisations. This was most evident in cases where individuals or schools withdrew from the network because of their concern that the work of the network was not relevant to the aspirations and priorities derived from their context. However, there were examples of schools and individuals who had managed to realise their own personal aspirations, within the collective organisation of a network. This suggests that networks are judged against the expectations of participants' working contexts, but that they do have the potential to be able to balance collective interests with the individual concerns of participants.

The relevance to participants' contexts also relates differently to the two models of networks' action research identified above. In doing so, this thesis extends understanding of the potential links between networks and action research established in other writing (Day & Hadfield, 2004; Day & Townsend, 2009; McLaughlin et al., 2007). In particular, 'nested' approaches to networking action research, in which action research 'projects' were located in member schools, were by design related to the contextual interests of network members from those schools. But despite the direct relevance to contexts, this could be seen as a lesser form of networking than approaches which, by design, bring together groups of participants from different contexts (termed here 'overlapping'). But the challenge of arranging groups of participants from different schools, in an overlapping approach, is that it increases the potential for the action research to be disconnected from those schools. This suggests that the aspirations of networked action research, to base development within contexts, can provide the basis for change, but the challenge in doing so is to ensure that the collective aspirations of networks are realised upon this contextual basis.

One contribution that this thesis makes to understanding the contextual relevance of action research networks is that nesting action research within member schools provides a more effective link to the contexts of network members than overlapping groups. The challenge in nesting action research is to ensure that the collective potential of networks is better realised.

### ***Community development through networked action research***

The second area of the theoretical significance of this thesis concerns developing an understanding of the relationship between networks and notions of community. As noted in the literature review, participatory interventions and the Networked Learning Communities explicitly intend to involve communities in a process of change relevant to their own aspirations, an approach contrasted against imposed, often policy related, change (Jackson, 2006; Park, 1999). This thesis contributes to the understanding of the relationship between community and networks, in two ways. The first, in keeping with participatory intervention literature, concerned the ways in which these networks engaged with communities of participants (as emphasised by a number of authors including: Park, 1999). The second referred to the ways in which communities of participants were formed through the operation of these networks (Darling-Hammond et al., 1995).

Two of the case study networks had chosen to separate different communities of participants, which seemed to be related to a concern to limit the influence of one community on another. This is an attempt at achieving participatory change, which recognises the influence that individuals have on each other, derived from their roles in that social setting (in this case schools). Whilst this also seems to be a limited interpretation of networking, one which challenges some of the bottom up aspirations of the networks, it could similarly be seen as a pragmatic approach to integrating different communities, recognising (but not challenging) those differing roles. This suggests that the application of networks in educational settings is related to notions of community, thus relating directly to the aspirations of participatory interventions (Park, 1999). However, in doing so, they are, firstly, especially concerned with the professional communities of the particular contexts in question and secondly, through

the process of engagement, taking into account the differing influences that these communities can have on each other.

The second interpretation of community came in the approaches of networks to forming communities of participants, and in the influence networks had on the communities of participating schools, which constitutes an extension to the theoretical descriptions of community in participatory interventions noted above. Central to this was the stimulus that the network provided for dialogue, an explicit intention of Network 2 but common to all three networks and also to networking literature (Darling-Hammond et al., 1995; Kärkkäinen, 2000). However, this thesis is distinctive in that it provides a specific illustration of the role of dialogue in community formation through networks, and not just as a quality of networks. When groups of action researchers were brought together with no previous history of working collaboratively, the most successful groups were concerned with developing themselves as a community of action researchers before they embarked on the action research itself. This community formation was also evident in other ways, and the conduct of action research in networks was also described as being influential in developing collaborative communities within member schools, in some cases through the intentional establishment of whole school action research groups. Therefore, one of the areas of theoretical significance of this thesis concerns seeing networks as ways to engage communities in processes of change but also in relating networks to community development within member schools.

### ***Reclaiming the production and use of knowledge***

A common feature of both action research and participatory interventions is that they are concerned with both knowledge and with changing actions or practices (Lewin, 1946; Park, 1999). The relationships developed through action research and participatory interventions (Levin, 1999) are also believed to contribute to the development, for the participant, of a better or more complete understanding of their own context (Bray et al., 2000). This is also related to power, in both action research and participatory intervention literature, with claims that individuals become involved in a process of local knowledge production (Schafft & Greenwood, 2003), which enables them to recognise and challenge the limitations placed upon them by more

powerful agents, who claim to construct knowledge of and about them (Gaventa, 1993; Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998).

This thesis also contributes to this perspective on the development of knowledge through networks, which was illustrated in the ‘fields of knowledge’ identified by the NCSL (NCSL, 2005e). This thesis confirmed the relevance of these aspirations to the actual approaches of networks. In the case study networks, there was also a desire to be able to tackle issues and identify solutions based around the interests and understanding that participants had of their own contexts and of their own work, thus explicitly raising issues of power. However, it seemed that these networks were not intended to provide a complete separation of the participants from the influence of their contexts, but rather allowing them to have a greater say over the developing practices and knowledge relating to their own interests. This interpretation of knowledge was not concerned with either adopting knowledge from outside, or growing it exclusively within the community associated with the network, but is an integration of the two. Thus, the networks established a system for communicating the process and outcomes of the work of individual participants.

This individual aspiration challenges the extent to which the networks were able to produce and share knowledge relating to the community as a whole, but the perceived danger of such uniform approaches is that they are based on assumptions of homogeneity and harmony in participating communities (Cooke, 2001). The connection of these networks with practice settings gives them a direct relevance to actions, but taking a participatory approach also requires freedom on behalf of the participant to say what is important and relevant to them, something which these networks were able to manage, in some cases, by allowing for the diversity of participants’ interests. The production of knowledge in these networks did not achieve the aim of participatory interventions in providing an opportunity to intentionally challenge the repressive structures of participants’ social contexts, but they did allow for diversity and both the production and interrogation of knowledge in the contextual settings around which the networks were based. The challenge was in then moving from the individual production of context relevant knowledge to more collective, community based, process of knowledge development and associated action. This aspect of theoretical significance, therefore, concerns the development

of knowledge through networks. This thesis suggests that the development of knowledge through action research networks is based within the working contexts of participants but that, in doing so, this knowledge is related to the demands of that context, including external policy requirements.

## ***Recommendations***

The research conducted for this thesis has attempted to understand the operation of the networks studied in relation to a particular programme, the networked learning communities, linked to the literature on participatory interventions. From this research a number of recommendations are derived and outlined below.

### **Recommendation 1: Further research on the sustainability of networks within the Networked Learning Communities.**

The first recommendation concerns the nature of the networks that were a part of the programme, with a particular view on sustainability. Each of the three networks studied for this thesis was a part of the Networked Learning Communities programme at the time that this research was conducted. Further research would establish the extent and ways in which the networking has been sustained since the end of the programme and the associated funding. This is in part a question of sustainability following the end of funding and would provide an opportunity to examine how networks coped without the funding or support from the NCSL.

### **Recommendation 2: further research on networks more generally.**

Whilst the discussion above highlights the issues drawn from this research, additional questions are raised which represent fruitful areas for additional research. The networks studied were from one particular initiative, the Networked Learning Communities, and whilst this enabled a tight focus for this thesis, it does represent an area from which to extend this research by examining other applications of networks. Networks have been applied in and across different settings, beyond the programme studied here, and so there appears to be potential to examine the broader implications of networking, as emphasised by the international symposia arranged at a range of



conferences, including the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) and the Collaborative Action Research Network. This suggests potential for further comparative research on the application of networks in different settings, and on particular networking approaches which span national divides.

There is also the potential to conduct further research on networking developments within the UK. This would include taking a networking view of the development of shared senior leadership teams, through federations of schools and the appointment of senior leaders with responsibilities for a number of organisations. Whilst this does not make explicit mention of networking, the arguments being based around the position of the senior leaders, and the fact that some of these arrangements have been put in place to bring together successful schools with less successful schools, suggests some form of collaboration or sharing between them, and hence networking. This seems to represent an area of fruitful focus for extending the lessons learned from networking research, especially in relation to the ways in which groups of teachers from different schools can work together.

**Recommendation 3: developing networks in reference to existing relationships.**

This third recommendation concerns the practical development of educational networks and in particular how such a development should take account of existing relationships. This thesis suggests that networking can offer opportunities for participants to work together productively, and that it can do so based around the practices and operation of participants' organisations. However, it also suggests that the nature of relationships, and the cultural contexts around which these networks operate, should be the basis of this work and be taken into account in the development of networks. This thesis suggests that, whilst developing networks from relationships embedded in practical contexts is time consuming, it is a worthwhile process. One aspect of this is in incorporating political aspects of the contexts in question, in particular in associating bottom up practitioner-led change with external policy agendas. The development of networks can provide a way of enabling practitioners to work together in developing understanding and practices which take into account policy agendas but which also are of relevance to the community of practitioners

themselves. The recommendation, therefore, is that the existing relationships and political considerations of network contexts should be explicitly recognised and incorporated as a part of network development.

**Recommendation 4: taking account of community development in network development.**

This recommendation concerns the interaction between the development of networks, and the nature of communities in, and related to, those networks. There are a number of issues which should be considered in the establishment and development of educational networks. This research suggests that developing networks should take account of the membership of those networks and should be concerned with how the 'community' of networks develops through this process. The second interpretation of community concerns the influence participants have on each other, related to their roles in member organisations, and should recognise, but not be restricted by, the influence of the participation of different communities. The final consideration for the development of networks concerns how these networks relate to the wider communities from which network participants have come. This suggests, therefore, that the development of networks should consider the differing communities from which participants come, and the effects that they can have on each other, but this also suggests that network development should not be limited to providing systems through which participants could meet but should also be concerned with the social development of participants as a community in its own right.

**Recommendation 5: action research as a mediating process between individual and collective aspirations.**

The final recommendation concerns the interaction of action research and networks. The networks studied suggested that action research was seen as being an activity which had relevance to participants and their own aspirations. But establishing a focus on individual contexts would seem to provide a challenge to the collaborative aspirations of networks, action research and participatory interventions. The final recommendation deals with this and concerns the shared purpose which comes from adopting common processes, even if the specific issues addressed by those purposes differ from one participant to the next. Action research can therefore be seen as being

a means of networking which allows for a shared process but does not prescribe the specific issues to be addressed. Thus, this final recommendation is that, in the development of networks, action research should be considered as one way in which networks can provide flexibility, whilst retaining a coherent identity.

### ***Conclusion: the participatory potential of networked action research***

The intention of this thesis was to examine action research networks, which were members of the Networked Learning Communities programme, with a particular interest in their participatory features. The three mixed method case studies conducted for this thesis showed that these networks had a number of common features and dealt with a range of issues in the ways in which they operated in relation to the contexts of participants, and the schools of which they were a part. These issues, explored as themes in the preceding four chapters, also relate differently to the principles of participatory interventions.

The first of these concerns what is regarded as a common quality of networks, namely their flexibility. This was evident at a number of levels in these networks and in the programme of which it was a part. The first of these concerns the flexibility for networks to establish their own approaches, as befitted their own aspirations and the demands of their own context, and was evidenced in the differing approaches of each of the three networks studied, despite their membership of a common programme. The second element of flexibility was evident in negotiations over the participation of schools and of individuals within those schools. This concerned both how the individual schools related to the networks, such as through the organisation of action research groups, and what issues those schools, and the individuals within them, decided to address. The adoption of action research seemed to be a significant feature of this flexibility, in providing a common, or shared, process, thus achieving the collective features of networks, but allowing a great deal of freedom for participants to identify issues of relevance to themselves. This, therefore, was a flexibility to enable participation from a variety of contexts, with a range of issues, and so allowed participation of a diverse group of participants in the shared endeavour of a network.

This flexibility, whilst an apparent quality of networks in general, seemed also to be a feature which enhanced their participatory potential and related to a second issue to arise from this research, concerning the relevance of this work to the contexts of individual participants and their organisations. The aspiration of these networks was to enable participants to address issues of particular concern to them and over which those participants had a great deal of freedom to choose. This was contrasted against the imposition of national policy. Thus the flexibility of the networks enables them to realise their aspirations to be based upon, and be relevant to, participants' contexts and, in doing so, enhancing their participatory potential.

One of the apparent challenges of networks achieving participant led-change is derived, however, directly from their location in the work of participating schools and, in particular in the existing roles and relationships of participants relating to those organisations. Whilst the potential of action research networks to stimulate change relevant to participants is enhanced through locating them in member organisations, the ownership of individual members is challenged by association with the power hierarchies of those organisations. One approach to coping with this, and one distinction between action research networks and participatory interventions, lies in the conception of community. In the former, 'communities' are perceived in relation to professional roles, and therefore influence between communities is taken into account in the process. In the latter, community tends to be defined geographically or culturally. In doing so, participatory interventions are accused of homogenising or assuming harmony of those communities. The combination of interest in individual contexts, and the concerns about community influence, suggests that these assumptions are not as evident in action research networks.

Action research networks, therefore, seem able to combine collective activity with individual, diverse, interests. In doing so, they provide opportunities for reclaiming, from external sources, control over the development of knowledge about practice and the actions resulting from such a process. Despite the tensions around influence, they appear, therefore, to have participatory aspirations in which participants are able to work together, interact and lead, formally and informally, processes of change based around contextually relevant aspirations.

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## Appendices

The following pages provide extracts from the process of research relating to this doctoral study. University regulations limit these appendices to 5000 words. This precludes being able to include complete extracts of interview transcripts, questionnaires, etc and so extracts have been provided below. These appendices are as follows:

APPENDIX 1: SAMPLE PAGES FROM THE NETWORK DATABASE .....	260
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## Appendix 1: Sample Pages from the Network Database

Microsoft Access - [Network contacts]

File Edit View Insert Format Records Tools Window Help

E-mail 1

Type a question for help

---

### Network Details

ID: 113

Network ID: XXXXXXXX

Network Name: XXXXXXXXXX

Network focus: Lifelong learning

Number of schools: 8

Primary:  Secondary:  Special:  Mixed:

1st cohort:  2nd cohort:  3rd Cohort:  4th Cohort:

Website: www.XXXXXXXX

Name 1: XXXXXXXX Name 2: XXXXXXXX

Role 1: Co-leader deputy head Role 2: Co-leader head of science

Institution 1: XXXXXXXX Institution 2: XXXXXXXXXX

Contact No 1: Contact No 2:

E-mail 1: XXXXXXXXXX@XXXXXXX.X.sch.uk E-mail 2:

### Notes

Practitioner research is described as one element of their woul through school inquiry groups. This initiative includes 6-10 members of staff in each school.

There is a meeting on the 17th March and 20th April which could provide further contacts.

### Nature of Inquiry

Inquiry type 0:

Inquiry type 1:

Inquiry type 2:

Inquiry type 3:

Est Number of inquirers: 0

Do not pursue further:

Find further information:

Information to be found

Need to establish the actual extent of practitioner action research as this is not clear from networks documents as some have not been available.

### Research Tracking

Request to take part:  Agreed to take part:  Declined to take part:

Date Questionnaires sent: 04/03/2006

Number of Questionnaires sent: 12

Date questionnaires returned:

Number of questionnaires returned: 0

Interview consent:

### Contact log

Meeting held with co-leaders to discuss participation in research.

Meeting held with inquirers in XXXXXXXXXX school. Questionnaires given to teachers from the school and one other. To be followed up with contacts to other schools direct.

Numbers provided by stuart for AR group numbers. Contacted as follows:

XXXXXXXXXX school, XXXXXXXX name ##### no. Phoned, 3/5 left message with receptionist. Tried again 11th May, no response. Rang 11th may, no response.

XXXXXXXXXX school, XXXXXXXX name ##### no.

Record: 45 of 106

1st E-mail address

NUM

Sample database page 1 for Network id: 113.

Microsoft Access - [Network contacts]

File Edit View Insert Format Records Tools Window Help

Network ID: [ ]

Format: Arial, Size: 9

**Network Details**

ID: 111

Network ID: [XXXXXXXX]

Network Name: [XXXXXX]

Network focus: Focus on learning

Number of schools: 12

Primary:  Secondary:  Special:  Mixed:

1st cohort:  2nd cohort:  3rd Cohort:  4th Cohort:

Website: www.XXXXXXXXXXXXXX.net/welcome

Name 1: [ ] Name 2: [ ]

Role 1: [ ] Role 2: [ ]

Institution 1: [ ] Institution 2: [ ]

Contact No 1: [ ] Contact No 2: [ ]

E-mail 1: [ ] E-mail 2: [ ]

**Notes**

Has appointed lead learners. Describes researching best practice, but no contact details or website provided. It does describe using action research in their activity record, but this is a one page document with an overview. The exact details of number of teachers is not clear. This group of lead learners would be the focus for research.

There is a website linked to a webdesign company but it is dead!

**Nature of Inquiry**

Inquiry type 0:   
 Inquiry type 1:   
 Inquiry type 2:   
 Inquiry type 3:   
 Est Number of inquirers: [ 0 ]

Do not pursue further:   
 Find further information:

**Information to be found**

Attempt to find contact details, and enquire as to nature of researching best practice (what extra is involved beyond identifying best practice)

Try contacting [name] at XXXX on [ ]

**Research Tracking**

Request to take part:  Agreed to take part:  Declined to take part:

Date Questionnaires sent: [ ]

Number of Questionnaires sent: [ ]

Date questionnaires returned: [ ]

Number of questionnaires returned: [ 0 ]

Interview consent:

**Contact log**

Contact attempted via enquiry form on the website. This is not ideal but there are no other direct contact details, in the event this returned an error message the enquiry was not submitted This website has not been updated for over a year!

N.B. SECOND ATTEMPT to fill out enquiry form SUCCEEDED

School phoned. [ ] has left, and been replaced by [ ] who was contacted and a message left on her voice mail on 21/4/06  
 Contacted again on the 11th May 06. Left message with request to return call.

Record: [ ] of 106

Form View

NUM

Sample database page 2 for Network id: 111

## **Appendix 2: Questionnaire**

# Practitioner Research in Networked Learning Communities

## **Questionnaire.**

Thank you for taking part in this research. The responses you make will contribute to research with participants from all over England. Your personal responses to this questionnaire will only be seen by the researcher, your responses and identity will be confidential. Should you choose to contribute to the interview aspect of this research your questionnaire responses will not be examined or referred to as a part of those interviews.

Whilst some responses might seem repetitive, please try to answer them as accurately as possible, as all of your answers will help me understand the significance of your work and the ways in which it can be supported. This questionnaire should take about 15 minutes to complete.

**Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.**

There will be opportunities for you to receive general feedback on the analysis of this questionnaire. Feedback on individual questionnaires will not be provided in order to protect the confidentiality of all participants. Please return the completed questionnaire to your network representative. If you would be prepared in principle to contribute to the interview section of this research please e-mail your details to: [name@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:XXXXXXX@nottingham.ac.uk), or complete and return this form.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

School name and Address:

Tel:

E-mail:

*Send to: Andy Townsend, PhD Student, XXXXXXXX, or  
Telephone XXXXXXXXXXXX*

**Section 1: General questions about you.**

1.1 Are you...? Female  <sub>1</sub> Male  <sub>2</sub>

1.2 What is your age?

Years: \_\_\_\_\_

1.3 How long have you worked in education?

Years: \_\_\_\_\_ Months: \_\_\_\_\_

1.4 How long have you been working in your current school?

Years: \_\_\_\_\_ Months: \_\_\_\_\_

The following information would help the research but please feel free to leave this section blank if you would prefer. **Please be assured that any information you provide will be treated in the strictest confidence.**

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_

The name of your Network: \_\_\_\_\_

The name of your school: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

---

1.4 What sort of school do you work in?

- |                 |                          |   |                    |                          |    |
|-----------------|--------------------------|---|--------------------|--------------------------|----|
| First school    | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 | Secondary school   | <input type="checkbox"/> | 6  |
| Junior school   | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | Specialist college | <input type="checkbox"/> | 7  |
| Combined school | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | Sixth form college | <input type="checkbox"/> | 8  |
| Middle school   | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | City academy       | <input type="checkbox"/> | 9  |
| Upper school    | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | Special school     | <input type="checkbox"/> | 10 |

Other, please name: \_\_\_\_\_

---

1.5 In your current job, what age are the pupils you work with?

*Please tick as many as are relevant*

- |             |                          |   |             |                          |   |
|-------------|--------------------------|---|-------------|--------------------------|---|
| Reception   | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 | Key Stage 3 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 |
| Key Stage 1 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | Key Stage 4 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 |
| Key Stage 2 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | 16+         | <input type="checkbox"/> | 6 |

---

1.6 Which of the following describe your responsibilities?

*Please tick as many as are relevant*

- |                    |                          |   |  |                          |   |
|--------------------|--------------------------|---|--|--------------------------|---|
| Class teacher      | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 | Key stage co-ordinator                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 |
| Teaching assistant | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | Subject coordinator/Head of department | <input type="checkbox"/> | 6 |
| Deputy Headteacher | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | Head of year/pastoral responsibility   | <input type="checkbox"/> | 7 |
| Headteacher        | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | Learning support teacher               | <input type="checkbox"/> | 8 |

---

1.7 Do you work in a particular subject area?

- |                 |                          |   |                          |                          |    |
|-----------------|--------------------------|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|----|
| English         | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 | Technology               | <input type="checkbox"/> | 7  |
| Maths           | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | Modern foreign languages | <input type="checkbox"/> | 8  |
| Science         | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | Special needs support    | <input type="checkbox"/> | 9  |
| Humanities      | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | ICT                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | 10 |
| Performing arts | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | No                       | <input type="checkbox"/> | 11 |
| PE              | <input type="checkbox"/> | 6 |                          |                          |    |

Other, please name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Section 2: Questions about research and inquiry.

### 2.1 Why did you become involved in inquiry?

*Please rate the following reasons for becoming involved in inquiry, from 1=not relevant to why I became involved in inquiry up to 3=an important reason why I became involved in inquiry.*

Reason for becoming involved in inquiry	Relevance of this reason to me 0=not relevant, 1=slightly relevant, 2=relevant and 3=very relevant reason .
1 Improve own classroom practice	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Support school improvement	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 Increase own subject knowledge	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 Enhance job satisfaction	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 Support pupil learning	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 Support pupil achievement	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 Establish best practice	<input type="checkbox"/>
8 Support other schools	<input type="checkbox"/>
9 Part of accredited course	<input type="checkbox"/>
10 Raise school standards	<input type="checkbox"/>
11 Improve chances of promotion	<input type="checkbox"/>
12 Promote social justice	<input type="checkbox"/>
13 Support colleague's inquiry	<input type="checkbox"/>
14 Persuaded to do enquiry	<input type="checkbox"/>
15 Directed to do inquiry	<input type="checkbox"/>

### 2.2 Which of the following influenced your choice of inquiry focus?

*Please tick as many as are relevant*

Personal classroom experience	<input type="checkbox"/>	1	The NCSL	<input type="checkbox"/>	5
Other schools in your network	<input type="checkbox"/>	2	Discussion with colleagues	<input type="checkbox"/>	6
School priority	<input type="checkbox"/>	3	Discussion with pupils	<input type="checkbox"/>	7
OfSTED identified priority	<input type="checkbox"/>	4	I was given the focus for inquiry	<input type="checkbox"/>	8



2.3 Which of these general themes relates to your inquiry?

*Please tick as many as are relevant*

Focus of enquiry	Relevance of this reason to me. 0=not relevant, 1=slightly relevant, 2= relevant and 3=very relevant reason .
1 Pupil's classroom learning	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Pupil achievement	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 National education policy	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 Special educational needs	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 Pupil behaviour	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 Classroom management	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 Use of technologies	<input type="checkbox"/>
8 Adult professional development	<input type="checkbox"/>
9 Gifted and talented pupils	<input type="checkbox"/>
10 Year group/key stage issues	<input type="checkbox"/>
11 Subject/department issues	<input type="checkbox"/>
12 Whole school issues	<input type="checkbox"/>
13 Pastoral issues	<input type="checkbox"/>
14 Issues with parents/carers	<input type="checkbox"/>
15 Identifying/ sharing best practice	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Other, please name:** \_\_\_\_\_

---

2.4 Have these specific developments played a part in your inquiry?

Pupil learning styles	<input type="checkbox"/> _1	Developing pupil literacy	<input type="checkbox"/> _6
Accelerated learning	<input type="checkbox"/> _2	Developing pupil numeracy	<input type="checkbox"/> _7
Assessment for learning	<input type="checkbox"/> _3	Excellence and enjoyment	<input type="checkbox"/> _8
Use of interactive white boards	<input type="checkbox"/> _4	Behaviour and attendance	<input type="checkbox"/> _9
Thinking skills	<input type="checkbox"/> _5	Emotional intelligence	<input type="checkbox"/> _10

2.5 What data did you use to inform your inquiry?

---

Existing school data.

- |                                       |                            |  |                            |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|--|----------------------------|
| Pupil exam results                    | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 | Data on pupil numbers/turnover           | <input type="checkbox"/> 4 |
| Pupil marks from class/home work      | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 | Data on the use of discipline strategies | <input type="checkbox"/> 5 |
| Data on pupil attendance              | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 | Standards of pupil work                  | <input type="checkbox"/> 6 |
| Other school data, please name: _____ |                            |  | <input type="checkbox"/> 7 |

---

Data from interviews

- |  |                             |  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| Individual pupil interviews              | <input type="checkbox"/> 8  | Group interviews with teachers               | <input type="checkbox"/> 11 |
| Group interviews with pupils             | <input type="checkbox"/> 9  | Individual interviews with parents/guardians | <input type="checkbox"/> 12 |
| Individual interviews with teachers      | <input type="checkbox"/> 10 | Group interviews with parents/guardians      | <input type="checkbox"/> 13 |
| Other interview data, please name: _____ |                             |  | <input type="checkbox"/> 14 |

---

Data from questionnaires

- |                                       |                             |                                      |                             |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Pupil questionnaires                  | <input type="checkbox"/> 15 | Questionnaires of non-teaching staff | <input type="checkbox"/> 17 |
| Teacher questionnaires                | <input type="checkbox"/> 16 | Parents questionnaires               | <input type="checkbox"/> 18 |
| Other school data, please name: _____ |                             |                                      | <input type="checkbox"/> 19 |

---

Data from observations

- |  |                             |  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| Observations of entire classes             | <input type="checkbox"/> 20 | Observations of unstructured periods of the day    | <input type="checkbox"/> 22 |
| Observations focussed on individual pupils | <input type="checkbox"/> 21 | Observations focussed on groups of selected pupils | <input type="checkbox"/> 23 |
| Other observation data, please name: _____ |                             |  | <input type="checkbox"/> 24 |

### Section 3: Partners in inquiry.

3.1 Who has supported your inquiry? Please indicate whether you have received support from individuals from the following organisations.

*Please tick as many as are relevant*

- |                                    |                          |   |                                |                          |    |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|---|--------------------------------|--------------------------|----|
| My own school                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | 1 | Networked learning communities | <input type="checkbox"/> | 7  |
| Other schools within the network   | <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 | Professional body/association  | <input type="checkbox"/> | 8  |
| Other schools outside the network  | <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 | Outside consultant             | <input type="checkbox"/> | 9  |
| Higher education/university        | <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 | Other                          | <input type="checkbox"/> | 10 |
| DfES/other government organisation | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | No support received            | <input type="checkbox"/> | 11 |
| The Local Education Authority      | <input type="checkbox"/> | 6 |                                |                          |    |

3.2 Please indicate who you have worked with in your Inquiry.

- |   | Yes                      | No                       |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 Pupils were consulted when selecting the focus for this inquiry                             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2 Pupils were used as a source of data  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3 Pupils were partners in the conduct of inquiry  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4 Pupils acted as inquirers   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5 I shared issues about the conduct of my inquiry with colleagues at my school                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6 I shared the outcomes of my inquiry with colleagues from my own school                      | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7 Colleagues in my school were consulted when selecting a focus for inquiry                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8 Colleagues in my school provided data for the inquiry                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9 I worked with colleagues in my school as partners in my inquiry                             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10 My inquiry focus was negotiated with colleagues from other network schools                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11 Colleagues from different network schools worked on the same inquiry focus                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12 I shared issues about the conduct of my inquiry with colleagues from other network schools | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13 I shared the outcomes of my inquiry with colleagues from other network schools             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

### ***Appendix 3: Interview Schedule for Semi-Structured Interviews***

1. Could you please explain how you first became involved with your network?
2. What was it that really appealed to you about joining the network?
  - a. What was it that appealed to you about action research?
3. Could you outline for me how the network is organised and how it works?
4. How does this organisation relate to your school?
5. How does action research relate to the network and to your school?
  - a. Who else is involved in action research in your school?
  - b. How do you work together?
  - c. How does the action research relate to school management and processes?
6. Could you please provide an outline of your current action research?
  - a. What issue are you addressing?
  - b. How did you decide on this focus?
  - c. Who else are you working with on this project?
    - i. Who are you collaborating with?
    - ii. Who is this work supported by?
  - d. What have you found out from this action research?
  - e. What have you/are you changing as a result?
  - f. How does this relate to your work?
  - g. How does this action research relate to the network?
    - i. Who else in the network has worked with you on this action research?
    - ii. Who have you shared this work with (& in what ways)?

## **Appendix 4: Extract of interview transcript**

30001a

I: So could you explain how you first became involved in the network?

P: Originally we were approached by a local authority advisor who was looking for schools that were interested in doing some sort of research and the headteacher and I decided that it would be something different and that because it was linked with the university that it was something that was worth exploring so I did go to the initial head teacher meeting which the headteacher didn't go to and we decided that we could do something in the vein and it was given to me as a responsibility to lead that.

I: So that responsibility was given to you, did you volunteer?

P: Well I suppose so yes, if I had said not then we wouldn't have done it, but the advisor was keen for us to get involved because she knew the school and so we agreed to do something that was a bit different because we thought it was about the right time for us because we had had OfSTED in 1997, 2002 and actually just after we started as part for the network, so we decided that it was the right time for us.

I: So what was it that really appealed to you about joining the network?

P: I don't think we probably realise at the time how long it would go on or where it would take us, I certainly didn't I think we felt that we could look at something that was school based and develop it from that angle because we felt that the staff needed a different vehicle into change and I suppose fundamentally because that is why we decided to do that, because previously the influence on change had been top down strategy work and this was an opportunity to try to change staff via research and the outcomes of research.

I: So the research element is an important part of the network, could you outline for me how the network is organised and how it works.

P: Well originally it was different because it was a local authority advisor who coordinated it along with two university representatives and they were very much in control of it and they would send out meeting notes etc and initially it was very, about eleven schools and it was led by that group and we probably took more along and were more involved in discussions at conferences, meetings, but what then happened people then got involved in the best practice research scholarships and so lots of peoples work obviously led towards that and I think some people did that and then dropped out as a result when that was finished, when the funding had gone. So really it was led by the authority and university representatives, and probably we had the same number in the SIG as we have now, there have been some changes in personnel but generally the structure of the network hasn't changed that much and the SIG has remained quite stable. The biggest changed when we joined the networked learning communities was that we then had co-leaders, and two head teachers took on that role and found it very demanding and that is how I then came to get involved as the network coordinator as they wanted someone to do various bits and pieces and I was

persuaded to do that, so I suppose that co-leaders role could be better, whether that has been a good thing or not I don't know, I think it depends on the personalities, and we have never been a network that have all done the same thing, each school, each SIG chooses its own focus, which I think this is important because otherwise if you don't allow schools their autonomy to decide on their own focus it is centrally driven again, so the work that the consultants do now is to facilitate enquiry work as opposed to leading the network, which was the original role of the consultants in that ensure that has been a major change but is reliant on certain people, co-leaders especially, to make things happen.

I: So did the feel of the network change when you became a networked learning community?

P: Not particularly, I think it has changed more since we have not had the funding from the national college. I think the biggest impact have been when certain schools haven't continued because there have been changes in the leadership I the school and when of course there was change in the age of transfer of local schools and certain schools lost their year three classes, and they then found affording being members of the network and carry out that research in small schools difficult, so I think that has had an impact, that we had a very stable group of schools for a number of years with funding and then after the funding diminished and I think that that changed the nature of the network. I also think when one headteacher left a school that changed, the replacement wasn't as committed.

I: Could you give me an outline about how the SIG has been organised in this school.

P: It started with interest, who wanted to be involved? So people chose to be involved in the group, so there have always been five of us and we have always tried to meet regularly, we have tried to meet every half term, or individuals meet within that group to do certain tasks, when we did something as a small group it worked, it was fine but we did that initially to trial something that we then went whole school with like the marking and feedback work which was very productive, I do think that that was productive at that time, I suppose an issue for us in this school was that we have had a lot of staff changes and having to keep going over those things is sometimes difficult, we tried to keep it whole school, I think we were interested in the learning environment to a degree, but generally speaking I think the learning environment here works well and I think then the outdoor area became important, and then healthy schools came in and all that, but I think we have in a way taken on a project now that links with what the headteacher is looking at which is continuing to look at writing which is an ongoing issue for us so in some ways what the SIG has to do now is balance the directive now from the headteacher and still ensure that there is an element of enquiry and ownership for everyone else.

I: So now you are balancing this top down initiative with what the inquiry group re doing?

P: Yes that's right because people are saying well the writing scores are down after you have been doing all of this work on writing, and I have had to say well no not necessarily what we were looking at was marking and feedback, that is only one element, at the end of the day what is important is that writing is teaching and we

were looking at attitudes to writing and exploring how it impacts on attainment and to a degree it may well. But the SIG have been spread throughout the school and the SIG have been used as examples really of how to do something and if we have got a meeting then the SIG will tend to lead that meeting and they will act as modelling, modelling tasks or whatever, and I think that [name] has grown through being I the SIG in terms of her management role, because she came on as an interested party and now she has got a more enhanced position within the school and so think that is really good two other members of the SIG are on the school development group and another member is a senior teacher, she is involved but probably not as much as senior teacher who has a GTP teacher and so is able to be more involved and so she and I work quite closely together. So it is flexible for other people to join but I sometimes think well it is difficult in this big school because the SIG is only one small group of people but at least I know in years one three and five these things are happening and so it is steering it in other directions as well.

I: So you have managed to keep the voluntary element of it, you haven't said that you have to have one person in each year group?

P: No but we could do you see.

I: But you've kept pushing away at how that group works with the rest of the school. Because I know that some schools have gone down the line of having a whole staff SIG.

P: I think you can do that if you are a smaller school because you can all be involved in it, but I think I am fortunate now because I do the staff meeting plan and I can say when we need a meeting, we need a while school staff meeting to discuss these issues and I can feed it not the plan, but it's on the development plan.

I: Do you think the SIG would be able to work without the representation from a member of the senior management team?

P: Probably not in this environment, unless you have got some really strong people who have been given that brief, if they were given the brief, but I said I wasn't able to do that any more then they would probably be able to carry on doing it.

I: So you wouldn't necessarily have to have someone actively involved but you would need an advocate?

P: Yes, that's right, someone being responsible for it.

## ***Appendix 5: Information sheet for participants***

# **Networking Action Research**

*A Townsend  
PhD Research Project  
School of Education,*

## **Research Aims**

This research will explore the conduct of action research in school networks, in particular:

1. How action research relates to working contexts.
2. How action research relates to networks.
3. What processes people use in action research and their reasons for doing so.
4. What the outcomes of action research are.
5. How the conduct and outcomes of action research is spread.

This research is all set within the current U.K. context of increasing use of methodologies which are related to action research, if not always explicitly. This would include: Best Practice Research Scholarships, inquiry in Networked Learning Communities, inquiry based school improvement projects, such as IQEA and the National Teacher Research Panel, and so is a timely piece of research.

My own interest in this work comes from a background as a teacher and manager in, mostly, secondary education in the UK. My own interest in action research developed almost in reaction to top-down imposed change, as I perceived that it was an approach based around issues identified by practitioners and ultimately led by those same practitioners. I am, therefore, interested in attempting to discover the changes resulting from action research, personally, to the action researcher themselves, and collectively to groups of practitioners, in particular in networks.

## **Proposed Research Methods**

The action research that most interests me is conducted through networks and I am proposing to collect data in three forms from participants in these networks. The data I would like to collect is as follows

1. Documents relating to networked action research.
2. Questionnaires completed by action researchers in the network.
3. A series of interviews with action researchers from across the network.



As this research is to be based around the conduct of action research in networks this data collection will be negotiated with network members. As a result I will be happy to feedback the outcomes of this research to any participants although this will be one respecting the confidentiality of participants.

## **How you can help.**

I am looking for groups of action researchers in networks willing to allow me to participate in this research. As a part of this I am happy to attend meetings, training events etc to explain my work and, as noted above, to provide feedback of the outcomes of this research. This research is conducted within the ethical guidelines of the university of Nottingham and the British Educational Research Association. As a result respondents have the right to withdraw from research at any time, data collected from this research will be identifiable only to the researcher, the use of this data in publications, including the PhD itself will be anonymous, any audio recordings of interviews will be accessed only by the researcher and respondents will be given the opportunity to comment upon the findings made from this research.

I am hoping that, having read this information you will be willing to meet to explore the conduct of this research in more detail. If you are willing to explore this in more detail then please contact me via:

E-mail: xxxx@nottingham.ac.uk  
Phone: XXXXXXXX

## ***Appendix 6: Consent agreement***

### **Networking and Action Research.**

PhD Research Project  
School of Education, The University of Nottingham

#### **Consent Agreement**

In agreeing to for this interview to take place I confirm that I have read the information about the project named above and that:

- Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
- I agree to take part, but I know that I may change my mind at any time and withdraw from the project without having to provide reasons or justification for that withdrawal.
- I understand that all information provided will be treated as strictly confidential and will be used only for academic purposes.
- I agree that research data gathered for this study may be published provided my name or any other information that might identify me is not used.
- Access to recordings will only be available to the researcher and his supervisor.

If I have any questions about the conduct of the research project, I may contact the researcher: XXXXXXXXXX, name@nottingham.ac.uk or his supervisor XXXXXXXXXX, name@nottingham.ac.uk.

Researcher's name      Andrew Townsend

## Appendix 7: Table of analytic themes

Issue	Network 1	Network 2	Network 3
1. Models of networking action research.	Network 1 arranged action research through common approaches within member schools. Topics and approaches were school specific within a loose shared network wide framework. Action research was aimed at developing practices based around the aspirations of SIG members and their schools. This was supported by external facilitators, and through the collaborative structures noted above.	Network 2 had established a clear improvement agenda to their action research. Following a period of improvement the rate of change had recently slowed and networked action research was seen as the mechanism for reinvigorating this change. Foci for action research were established through network wide consultation and groupings established of participants from different schools.	Network 3 originally established pairs of action researchers also with an improvement agenda. This agenda was intended to improve science teaching, which had been identified as a weakness although action researchers were free to identify a personal topic or focus. This model of action research was supported through a series of seminars provided by an academic. This approach evolved with a loosening of both the structure and overall focus of the action with time.
2. Conceptions of and engagement with Communities.	Notions of community were associated with the establishment of collaborative action research groups. In particular different school communities (pupils, teachers and headteachers) had different action research groups.	Raised by the different approaches of a number of cross school action research groupings case study 2 poses questions about whether the development of community should precede the conduct of action research.	A 'community' of 'failing' teachers were identified to be improved by the process of networked action research. School community is also implicit in associations made between cultural and structural dimensions of action research and the influence of networked action research on developing communities of enquiry.
3. Collaboration.	Notions of different communities of action researchers interacted with the, within school, collaborative structures of the School Inquiry Groups (SIG) which were mainly comprised of teachers but received support of senior leaders and consulted pupils. Collaborative opportunities were provided through network events and action research process and outcomes were shared, but without direct collaboration.	This network aspired to create cross school collaborative groups. These had different degrees of success, a strength was noted to having colleagues within the same school collaborating and more collaboration we felt within than between schools.	The scope of collaboration emerged as an issue in relation to the discussion of structural and cultural aspects of action research networks. Some schools felt that they could collaborate across all staff because of a constructive school culture, others that collaboration was limited to individuals with common perspectives, hence developing a shared cultural perspective.
4. Voluntarism, participation and ownership of change.	Participants in Network 1 strongly identified with the ownership of the process of change resulting from networked action research as a significant factor in their motivation to become involved in the action research aspects of the network. Participation in the SIG groups was always intended to be voluntary although a tension was highlighted between a desire for participation or representation of all school staff and voluntarism.	Network representatives argued that 'bottom up change' was a central principle of their work. This was seen, in some senses, as a contradiction to the aspirations to improve schools in relation to an externally imposed standards agenda. The distinction made by participants, referred to the ability to examine and develop practices of interest to themselves, but with an overall improvement aspiration. This was also an issue which related to the leadership of the action research groups.	Network 3 was created with the intention of improving performance in science teaching. To achieve this pairs of action researchers were established in member schools which included one science teacher. As a result this network had an element of compulsion with over 50% of participants identifying that they had been instructed to participate in action research. However participants still emphasised the importance of the freedom that they had to identify areas for improvement and the methods by which it was to be achieved
5. Leadership and networked action research.	Network 1 established groups of action researchers which took account of existing school leadership structures. This included establishing a separate headteacher's action research group. The importance of headteacher advocacy and support for other action research groups was also emphasised. As well as these considerations of existing school leadership the network also established new leadership positions, network facilitator and SIG coordinator.	The cross school action research groups established in Network 2 did not include headteachers. Neither was there a specific headteacher role in the action research aspects of the network. However participants did emphasise the importance of headteacher support in making a success of the action research projects. Leadership was also explicitly mentioned by one participant who attributed the failure of their action research group to a lack of leadership.	Network 3 had originally adopted what could be regarded as a deficit model of action research, as the network was arranging action researchers in pairs to improve a perceived efficiency in science teaching. By the third year of the network these roles had evolved with the initial group of action researchers taking on roles where they would support and advise on action research conducted by other teacher, i.e. leadership roles.