Creating a collaborative leadership network: an organic view of change

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This study investigated the value of the West Alabama Learning Coalition, a multi-institutional organization in rural Alabama, as perceived by its members, a diverse group of professionals in schools, universities, community colleges, businesses, and social service agencies. Documents, observations, and interviews were the data collection tools in this qualitative research study. Factors that motivated members to join and remain involved in the network are reported. The analysis resulted in a view of the coalition as a dynamic and organic creative entity that fosters synergy, empowered and shared leadership, and personal and organizational transformation.

Scope and purpose of study

The growing awareness of the benefits of collaboration in educational settings has contributed to the expansion of professional networks that connect individuals and institutions (Hafernik *et al.* 1997, Mullen and Lick 1999). Such change requires educational leaders to design collaborative organizational structures (Dynak *et al.* 1997). However, few scholars have written about the formation, development, and impact of these partnership initiatives (Lieberman and Grolnick 1997).

This article offers a unique perspective on one such collaborative network that might serve to assist others in establishing similar inclusive environments. This network, the West Alabama Learning Coalition (WALC), is a multi-institutional partnership that seeks to improve schools, teacher education, and the community. In keeping with the theme of this special issue of *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, we explored this coalition from the practitioner's view. We opted to take this approach rather than examine how theory is reflected in practice from a researcher's view. This piece creates theory from practice by presenting an analysis of the motivation of members, benefits, and experience of

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involvement in a partnership network dedicated to educational improvement in schools, universities, and the community.

For this study we did not delve into traditional, evaluative issues of what worked and what did not work. Instead, the purpose of our research was to discover if and how the coalition structure influenced its members' perceptions and experiences of the partnership and its significance. We were guided by Duke's (1998) notion that context influences organizational structure and the type of leadership developed and implemented within that structure. We found it useful to focus on why people choose to engage in partnership work and to learn what personal/professional value they gained from their involvement. Thus, we explored the WALC network from the inside out. The reader will find this article steeped in the impressions and evaluations of coalition participants.

We begin this account of our exploration with a brief review of the relevant literature on partnership networks. This is followed with an overview of the background, context, and structure of the WALC. Next, we outline the methods used for this study, including the data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, we present the insights gained.

Relevant literature on partnership networks

We identified two types of educational networks relevant to our study: teacher networks and organizational partnerships. Both are closely related to the purposes and structure of WALC. A brief overview of these networks follows.

Teacher networks

Teacher networks have played a significant role in enhancing the continuous professional development of teachers (Clune 1993). Lieberman and McLaughlin (1992) identify the features shared by successful teacher networks. Such networks tend to provide a clear focus combined with a common purpose and identity. They include activities that function as opportunities for self-direction, involve interdependent communities where teachers solve problems together, and create opportunities for leadership both within the network and through transference to other domains, with a focus on schools. Involvement in teacher networks promotes learning for teachers and their students, higher levels of motivation, and expanded feelings of empowerment (Firestone and Pennell 1997, Lieberman and McLaughlin 1992).

Organizational partnerships

Partnership support groups link individuals across institutional or professional status domains to aid them in their work responsibilities and

to provide support for professional development. The individual purposes and forms of support for such groups vary. For example, the Multicultural Mentorship Project is a network designed to guide preservice teacher interns to be effective in increasingly diverse classrooms (Taylor and Larke 1997). Another example, the Partnership Support Group (PSG), brought together the different school cultures and university professionals to create a mentoring-based research network (Mullen 1999, 2000). More inclusive than a teacher network, the PSG spearheads the work of teacher – professor – administrator – student groups that create a democratic relationship through collective book production and authorship (Mullen and Lick 1999).

Partnerships that link organizations to improve education are created around schools and universities in some formal way (The Holmes Group 1990) or by using a shared set of basic principles (Goodlad 1990, Sizer 1992). These partnerships have helped to bridge the gap between universities and schools by improving preservice education and by bringing about changes in K-12 and higher education environments (Allen and Lunsford 1995, Kochan 1999). A small group of these organizational partnership networks, some of which are exclusively community-based, has been established to encourage the growth and capacity of its members to function as a learning community and the creation of structures based on fairness and equity. Significantly, the field shows signs of increased activity to create structure for disadvantaged schools and citizens (Lieberman and Grolnick 1997, Mullen and Patrick 2000). One such partnership network is The West Alabama Learning Coalition.

The West Alabama Learning Coalition

The West Alabama Learning Coalition (WALC) is an interdependent collective of six uniquely structured Professional Development School (PDSs) partnerships. PDSs are a type of organizational partnership proposed by The Holmes Group (1990: 7) to link schools and universities as a 'new kind of institution focused on improving education at all levels'. The five purposes for PDS partnerships adopted by the WALC are to:

- provide an exemplary P-12 education for all;
- improve preservice teacher education;
- provide opportunities for developing collaborative learning communities;
- enhance continuing professional development; and
- conduct research and inquiry.

In 1996, Richard Kunkel, Dean of the College of Education at Auburn University, began a dialogue with educators in West Alabama to create the WALC, with partial funding from the Jesse Ball Dupont Foundation. The WALC has its organizational foundation in the Alabama Learning

Coalition, which was established in 1993 to encourage the formation of PDSs throughout the state and the nation. The coalitions are coordinated through the Truman Pierce Institute, a major outreach arm of Auburn University.

Both coalitions aim 'to create a community of learners sharing a common purpose, operating in a diverse manner, learning from one another, and being a change catalyst in the state' (Kochan and Kunkel 1998: 325). The WALC is unique in a number of ways. First, the stakeholders represent a broad constituency of diverse professionals in schools, universities, community colleges, businesses, and social service agencies. Thus, membership expands beyond traditional PDS structures to take a community development approach to school improvement and reform. There are six partnership teams that constitute the WALC, all of which have been members since its inception. Two of the partnerships include the entire school system and both of them partner with a community college. The other four partnerships unite a school and university. In addition, each partnership includes either a business or community member, or both. Four of the partner schools serve primarily African American student populations and two serve primarily rural, poor White American groups. The members of the WALC are both female and male, and ethnically black and white.

The second unique feature of the WALC is its regional membership, including people who have unique situations in their own school settings but who are also united in being located in one of the most economically depressed areas in the US. This region, commonly referred to as the Black Belt because of its rich black soil, has a great need for educational and economic improvement.

It is difficult to summarize the severity of the needs of the West Alabama region. But, the impact of this severity can be felt in the stories that are told by those who know it best. David Wilson (1998), Vice President for Outreach at Auburn University, for example, has described his own experiences of growing up in the Alabama Black Belt. His father and mother, who laboured under the watchful eyes of white property owners, endured failing health due to inadequate health care, shelter, and clothing. Against this background of severe impoverishment and human resilience, the coalition seeks to operate as a thriving network of collaborative relationships that will benefit everyone.

The third unique characteristic of this network is each partner has a team that serves as a catalyst for change in their home site and that also operates as part of the larger team known as the WALC. Partners meet to build their relationships and develop processes to realize goals. Individual partnership initiatives include: the creation of mathematics and reading tutorial programmes (to increase standardized test scores); a teacher training programme to improve writing skills; the parent involvement group to educate children; a public relations programme; a value-added contextual report card; a community leadership programme; a school–university accreditation team and whole school-study process (Mullen and Stover 2000); and university faculty and preservice teachers working together in cooperative learning situations with classroom teachers. The

expansion of opportunities where student teachers are able to gain classroom experience is a central goal of all work with university partners. This is combined with the revision of teacher education curricula.

The fourth innovative attribute of this network is the shared leadership and joint responsibility within the coalition. This emphasis was part of the reason for calling the group a coalition rather than a network or PDS. The word *coalition* was chosen deliberately to denote a commitment to a practice of reform and equality between and among partners. The name defines the group as part of a mutualistic framework, which encompasses Cunningham and Gresso's (1993: x–xii) notion that 'an excellent organization is not about power; it is about empowerment'. The coalition was conceived using Bolman and Deal's (1993: 60) advice to 'Empower everyone: increase participation, provide support, share information, and move decision making as far down the organization as possible'.

Democratic actions of the WALC focus on the building of support structures for academically at-risk schools, professionals, and especially children. Coalition members operate proactively, serving as principal actors in shaping the purposes, goals, and functions of their organization. Leadership is shared and all institutions and members—teachers, administrators, university faculty, and community members—are considered to have equal status. These could all be considered examples of the type of 'transformational leadership practices' that manifests change and renewal at both the individual and organizational level (Klein and Diket 1999).

The coalition partners meet biannually at sites in Alabama to learn from one another and to hear from national figures engaged in educational partnership development. Conferences last two days and the PDS members meet, make formal presentations, share informally, exchange ideas within and across the various PDSs, and even dine and participate in cultural outings together.

As a part of shared leadership and responsibility for the operation of the coalition, members evaluate each meeting. The members rate the best aspects of the meeting and those areas that need improvement. An annual evaluation report, written by Cynthia Reed, Auburn University, includes summaries of these biannual evaluations, individual partnership reports, assessments of each of the partnership's activities, and on-site visits. The annual reports are shared with WALC members by the Auburn coordinators to provide support to the partnerships in the larger effort to improve the effectiveness of the coalition. In the words of one participant in this study, 'I think the coalition provides an opportunity to showcase practices and innovations and those kinds of things. I see it as more than a support system—it's really an umbrella for the various PDSs'.

Research methods

Researcher roles

We both came to the data collection phase of this study having already created and experienced professional collaborative relationships and

structures for several years (Kochan and Kunkel 1998, Kochan 1999, Mullen 1999, Mullen and Lick 1999). We were both participant/observers in the WALC who served in different roles. Frances Kochan has been with the project since its inception and currently serves as codirector with Dean Kunkel. Carol Mullen has initiated collaborative groups in the past and entered the coalition setting in 1998 as a researcher who assumed a leadership role for this study. We found that our different roles and involvement complemented this study.

Data collection

Since our purpose was to understand members' perceptions of the coalition and its value, we focused on why they engaged in the partnership work. We used documents, observation, dialogues, and interviews as sources to investigate the issues addressed. First, we reviewed the documents related to the coalition, including background information, meeting handouts and minutes, and the three annual evaluation reports. After reviewing the documents, we discussed our perceptions of these materials and our own observations of the meetings. These conversations were tape-recorded and transcribed. We used these transcribed records to focus our interviews on one central question: 'Why do individuals participate in The West Alabama Learning Coalition?'

We developed 15 interview questions around two issues: (1) motivation for initial involvement in the coalition, and (2) reasons for continued participation. Ionesco's (cited in Bonnefoy (1971)) crucial notion—it is the question rather than the answer that enlightens— inspired how we framed our interview protocol. We sought not so much answers as an enhanced understanding of the coalition. Our questions addressed these 10 areas:

- reasons for personal involvement;
- benefits accrued by involvement;
- overall personal ratings in terms of its effectiveness (and ineffectiveness);
- value of the coalition to its members;
- value of the coalition to the PDS team, organization, and region;
- value of the coalition to educational reform;
- value of the biannual conferences;
- possible involvement of members with other PDS stakeholders and coalitions;
- contribution by members to their PDS and to the coalition as a whole; and
- description of and personal metaphor for the WALC.

The questions were distributed to the interviewees prior to the interview with a request that they read them and reflect on what participation in the network means to them and why they stay involved as members. Because we did not presume that the experience of being a

member had acted as a catalyst for change, we avoided using the language of change and transformation during the initial contact and in the interview.

Our goal was to learn about the WALC through an authentic engagement with its participants. We used probing questions to prompt deeper reflection than had been elicited by the formal evaluations about the strengths and limitations of the coalition.We wanted this part of our study to examine the value of the network by engaging the 'tacit knowledge' of the participants. By doing so, we hoped to learn about those forces that Fullan (1999: 15) describes as 'intricate, embedded interaction inside and outside the organization which *converts tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge on an ongoing basis*' (italics in original). We asked participants to describe ideas and feelings about their experience of the coalition by telling them that their perceptions were important to our own learning, a process that helped to build shared power and mutual trust.

The interviewees represent key stakeholder groups in the WALC partnership. They were a heterogeneous sample in terms of ethnicity, gender, and role diversity. Nonake and Takeuchi (cited in Fullan, 1999: 85) suggest that this 'sharing of tacit knowledge among multiple individuals with different backgrounds, perspectives, and motivations becomes the critical step for organizational knowledge to take place'.

We independently interviewed the research respondents via a speakerphone, in one-hour sessions. The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and analysed independently so that we could compare our perceptions of the conversations. We shared our thoughts, feelings, and insights after completing the telephone interviews. We also taped and transcribed our own post-interview conversations to better analyse the interview data.

Data analysis

We developed a matrix arranged in the order of the interview questions. We recorded the name of the interviewee, position/professional role, gender, ethnicity, data (responses), subthemes, themes, main categories, and powerful quotes from the interviews onto the matrix. This recording method facilitated our ability to compare responses across all data sets. Initially we analysed a set of responses together before evaluating the entire data set individually in order to develop a similar coding approach before conducting our individual analysis. For example, one interviewee responded to the question, 'what were the primary reasons you decided to become part of the coalition?', by saying, 'to get help for our school and to get our students individual help with the learning of specific skills. Our teachers needed to have someone to contact to get needed assistance with certain areas. We wanted closer ties with the university and to have the opportunity to attend conferences'.

Next, we used the constant comparative method of analysis (Merriam 1998), blending common ideas into themes to analyse the data. As we examined the principal's statement together, we agreed on the subthemes

'to improve instruction', 'school/university connection', and 'enhanced professional development' for this particular principal's statement. We then arrived at the general theme 'help for school and teachers' for her response. We did this inductive work with other statements as well until we understood one another's system of analysis. Then we conducted our individual analyses, recording our subthemes, themes, and categories on the matrix chart. After comparing our lists, we reviewed the transcriptions of our initial dialogues to allow additional insights to emerge. We reworded themes that were similar and devised for them a theme category. If one of us had identified a theme, we shared our reasoning and made decisions about the accuracy of our findings. By combining the themes into more comprehensive categories we arrived at salient themes and insights.

This process of conducting independent analyses of the data followed by an explanation of the reasoning behind the themes we had each identified enhanced the credibility of our study. Establishing this internal consistency in our interpretive themes enabled us to arrive at consensus and minimize any potential biases either of us may have held (Miles and Huberman 1994).

Thematic analysis of the data: a synopsis

Initial motivators

The initial motivators for members to join the coalition were their (a) perception of the WALC as matching their organizational goals, and (b) expectation that their organizational and personal needs would be met. To our surprise these goals and needs matched four of the five purposes of PDS relationships framed by The Holmes Group, previously noted, upon which the coalition was founded. One of the main reasons given by members for joining the coalition was that it would help them to meet their organizational goal of improving P-12 education and teacher education. Typical remarks regarding this purpose were: 'we wanted to get help for our students', 'this would help our school improve', and 'this would help us pull up our test scores'. Respondents were also concerned about improving teacher education as exemplified in such remarks as, 'this would make us available to help future teachers', and 'we wanted our [preservice] students to get hands-on experience'.

Respondents also viewed membership in the coalition as enhancing their organizational and professional life by creating new and strengthened institutional relationships and skills. They talked about the importance of being part of a collaborative community and made such comments as: 'we wanted to be involved with other institutions interested in PDS work', 'we aimed to network with public schools', and 'we desired closer ties with the university'. The closely related purpose of having a venue for professional development was another important reason for becoming a part of the coalition, as noted by such comments as: 'to keep abreast of trends in education', and 'to get access to changes and educational innovations'. The idea of engaging in 'research and inquiry', one of the purposes of both the

coalition and The Holmes Group, was mentioned by only one respondent. Interestingly, when examining the outcomes of PDS activities this purpose seems to be the one most often neglected (Kochan and Kunkel 1998, Mullen and Lick 1999).

Motivating elements

Formative and summative evaluation ratings of the coalition by the members and the ratings of our interviewees consistently ranked the effectiveness of the coalition between four and five on a five-point scale. To better understand this high rating, we asked interviewees why they continued to participate in coalition activities. Our analysis of their responses identified three major benefits that motivated members to continue their involvement in the coalition: satisfying goals, strengthening the organization, and receiving personal benefits.

Satisfying goals.   A primary reason for continued involvement in this network was that it resulted in satisfying the members' institutional goals. Thus, it appears that their main purpose in joining the network has been realized. They spoke of achieving 'growth in reaching our goals'. They also remarked that they had been successful in accomplishing specific institutional and partnership objectives. As one person stated: 'Our teachers know that they are helping preservice teachers to become master teachers in the future'. Another said: 'The PDS connection helps us place interns, and improve school programs and test scores', while a third commented: 'This relationship helps us to create better professional development for teachers'.

This perceived congruence between individual institutional (partnership) goals and coalition (national) goals was summed up by one respondent: 'Once the structure was in place, we were able to do some things that we had wanted to do. So, I feel like the coalition has provided us with a framework to do what we really had in our minds all along'. Similarly, another stakeholder shared: 'We'd been aware of the initiatives in a nationwide sense, but somehow we lacked the impetus that we needed to go ahead and plug into our particular setting'. These comments suggest that the WALC network motivates its members to translate in their own terms and for their own ends the national level goals.

The closeness between the respondents' reasons for becoming coalition members and The Holmes Group's principles may be valuable for others as they gain support for innovative efforts. The fact that the group saw itself as working together with a common goal is a binding force in network involvement. This national–regional fit between the coalition members' goals and the national Holmes PDS goals is, for us, an example of what Sergiovanni (1998: 39) calls 'intellectual capital'—'the sum of what everyone knows and shares that can help the school [or organization] be more effective in enhancing the learning and development of students [or members]'.

Strengthening the organization. This strengthening of the organization dealt with two aspects: organizational improvement and the changing of organizational roles. A second factor in maintaining membership in the coalition is that these professionals believe their participation strengthens their overall organization. This belief was evident in such remarks as: 'Participation motivates us and gives us backbone', and 'We listen and learn about what others have done and will do and we bring strengths back to our school'. Another said, 'The university partnership helps to implement new programs, such as tutoring and SAT-9 [Stanford Achievement Test] incentives'. One respondent summarized the core of this outcome with the remark: 'When you improve a school in one area, it improves the whole'.

Participants also believe that roles have been redefined and expanded, causing school and university participants to become more closely aligned. The fact that this was one of the reasons for joining the coalition may be an important contributing factor in its continued participation and life. Most university respondents benefited from change in attitude and relationships that occurred for them as a result of their involvement. One of them commented: 'We have a much more holistic view. Our faculty is more appreciative of the role that the P-12 teachers have—it's no longer a ''we'' versus ''they'' attitude'. School-based participants expressed pleasure in their role in working with preservice teachers, and saw this as an important contribution and change in their role. For instance, one teacher noted: 'The coalition provides for everyone involved to become active in making the process of preparing an individual to teach a collaborative effort'. There were no such comments made by the community-based members, so we do not know whether this was a factor in their continuation.

Deriving personal benefits. In addition to organizational benefits, respondents indicated that they have remained involved in this networking endeavour because of the personal benefit they received from their participation. Two types of personal benefit were experienced: (1) enhanced understanding of the field of education and how it can be changed, and (2) heightened leadership capacities. These two benefits are discussed below.

Members' enhanced understanding of the field of education dealt with a broadening of their own perceptions and an increased capacity to take action to create change. The participants indicated that their view of education has expanded as a result of having been exposed to a diversity of people with different skills and backgrounds. One individual responded: 'I am learning from the diversity of people from various locations who bring different needs and strengths to the table, which is great'. Another said: 'I enjoy being associated with highly skilled, very competent people because it stimulates my own professional development'. Others spoke of learning new skills such as 'developing the ability to present in front of others', and 'learning how to collaborate more fully'. Some talked about acquiring new knowledge and learning and growing. One respondent stated: 'I have been teaching for 20 years but it has been the coalition experience that has helped to broaden my view of where education is going and to see what it can be, instead of just staying in that little rut'.

Members spoke about how their participation in the coalition had led them to a clearer understanding of what needed to be done to make educational reform happen. They talked about themselves not as passive observers but as change agents who could and would take action within and beyond their own immediate spheres. For example, one individual said: 'We need to get more people at the top committed [superintendents] and we need to get more systems and colleges involved in the coalition—two goals that I am personally working toward'. Another said: 'We have assisted our university partners with future educators in many areas of local school expertise'. Someone else reflected on the role of reform in the context of public education and its survival: 'If public education is to survive, we have to meet the needs of our community; one way to do that is to make sure that institutions that provide training and those that provide services are ''in sync'' by using vehicles like those used in the coalition'. A few individuals commented on how schools need to proactively create partnerships by taking the initiative to reach out to universities: 'It's one thing to reform education by making a difference in what we're providing our students, but it's another to make this connection happen with institutions of higher learning'.

The theme of heightened leadership capacity was mirrored in respondents' comments about feeling empowered within the coalition and being valued and more self-assured as an outcome of their involvement. One school participant commented: 'I feel like we're on the cutting edge of doing something that is really going to make a difference, and I get personal satisfaction from being involved in that'. Another person said: 'I am experiencing a real sense of enthusiasm. It's invigorating and energizing to be involved in a coalition that ties into our profession and our work as professionals'. A school leader who is searching to become a more empowered role model said: 'I like being a part of education reform. I want to be one of those who make things happen. I know that I need to be more proactive. So, it's helping me by working with other people more'. A participant who applied the knowledge gained from the coalition structure and meetings commented: 'Personally, the knowledge and information I get offers a different approach or way of doing things that we've needed for so long in the schools, and it's helping me to use those ideas in various ways in my principalship'.

People also shared that participation has raised their own feelings of importance and efficacy. Among the most poignant comments were: 'It provided me with development and the knowledge that I was cared for and valued as an educator'; and 'It makes me feel good and proud to be part of educational history in the making'.

Problems and concerns

While the WALC has drawn together multiple PDSs with an identifiable purpose of collaboration, it is not a structure that is solidly in place. Our research indicates that although members are committed to the group, problems exist that must be addressed in order to increase its effectiveness.

Major areas of agreement regarding problems and struggles of the WALC underscore the need to bring members together to meet more often both formally as a whole group (for motivational reasons) and as individual PDSs (for school improvement purposes). Other problems noted include: time constraints on being able to meet regularly; the need for top leadership (e.g., superintendents, school board members, and university deans) to become committed and involved; and insufficient sharing from school practitioners at the coalition meetings.

Additional issues that were raised at least once include: the difficulty of a two-year community college getting its PDS development underway; the need to generate more local and state-wide publicity and communications; the importance of including more systems and colleges in the coalition; and the need for individual PDSs to connect more frequently and to share activities across (not just within) partner sites.

The soul of the WALC collaborative

Coalition essences

The open sharing and profound insights we received about the value of the coalition as a community endeavour supporting quality relationships and the powerful aspects of personal and organizational empowerment has increased our appreciation. We have come to recognize the importance of Hustedde's (1998) position that 'soul' needs to be discussed within research-based community development efforts and within professions more generally. Bolman and Deal (1997: 340,344) offer a message about the soul of an organization: 'The heads and hands of leaders are vitally important. But so are their hearts and souls . . . soul is a bedrock sense of who we are, what we care about, and what we believe in'.

Our findings revealed consistent themes that flow from inner personal motivations for involvement and that form the essence, or soul, of the coalition. These themes are synergy, empowerment, and transformation. Members joined and remained in the coalition because its goals were consistent with their own. The synergy between these goals and their own appears to be a creative source that inspires members to think and operate creatively. One respondent we quoted earlier captured this experience of synergy by indicating that there is a sense of enthusiasm that is invigorating and energizing from being a part of the coalition. This synergy is a driving force in creating a feeling of empowerment among the members.

The WALC network was designed to promote and uphold equality of leadership. The strategies employed to implement this shared leadership included creating teams from diverse stakeholder communities and having multi-level (individual team and coalition) teams, goals, meetings, and evaluation. It appears that this sharing of responsibility has created a sense of empowerment in people and the coalition, allowing members to speak about changes that have been created at all levels: national, coalition, institutional, partnership, and personal. Individuals appear to feel a stronger sense of control over their destiny and the future of the profession.

It is difficult to determine whether any one element of involvement, such as having multiple stakeholders or biannual meetings, had a greater impact on creating a sense of power. All the respondents, no matter what their job position, viewed themselves as leaders in and supporters of an endeavour that is making a difference in their institution, their relationships, their state, and themselves. As one member framed it succinctly: 'Together, we can!'.

The synergy of a group enhances its capacity to achieve and succeed, with the potential to permeate an entire structure at the level of the personal, team, institutional, and inter-institutional (Mullen and Lick 1999). Within the WALC partnership, the interplay between synergy and empowerment appeared to have created the conditions for transformation, the impact of which cut across personal, organizational, and relational dimensions. Respondents consistently spoke of being deeply connected to something that is larger than themselves, which gives them guidance while they strive to make a significant contribution. Among the most powerful of these comments was: 'We are receiving a boost in enthusiasm and energy from being part of something bigger than what we are individually as people, as professionals, and as an institution'. The transformative energy revealed in this statement transcends all the themes we have discussed. The people spoke glowingly of their individual and collective efforts in relation to an evolving whole that is taking hold at the local, regional, and national level. They identified changes in their organizations, themselves, and their relationships.

Our findings have led us not to an overarching theory of change, but rather to a metaphoric vision of what the coalition is and a better understanding of why its members continue to be involved. We have created a quasi-theoretical perspective. It is based on an intersubjective view of the coalition that was derived through the multiple eyes of its participants, and perhaps that is all we can expect. For as Wheatley (1994: 7) reminds us: 'There are no recipes or formulae, no checklists or advice that describe ''reality''. There is only what we create through our engagement with others and events'.

We have come to view the coalition as an evolving, dynamic organism that shapes individuals and is shaped by them. As such, it confirms Duke's (1998: 182, 183) proposition that 'leadership cannot be outside of context' and that 'organization members play a part in shaping normative context of organizational leadership'. We believe the coalition has created 'webs of leadership' through organizational team efforts that have connected leaders in schools, universities, and communities.

Web spinners

In metaphorical terms we view the coalition as a spider-web, as depicted in Figure 1. We invite our readers to view the spider's web without the usual sinister connotations. For purposes of our analysis we view the coalition and its attributes as the spider, creating and recreating the web/network and members within it, serving to bring the strength and power to that effort.

Thus the web becomes a thing of beauty, in constant motion as the spider
spins new dimensions and expands connections. The coalition attributes we
have identified as forming this living structure are its structure and
organizational processes: multi-professional and multi-institutional mem-
bership, local teams dealing with community issues, joint partnership
meetings, and mutual purposes linked to local and national agendas. The
initial motivating factors for joining the coalition—that its purposes fulfilled
the desire to be a part of a collaborative community and matched
organizational goals and purposes—are viewed as the long strands of the
web. These strands flow directly from the coalition attributes and provide
an anchor for the connecting threads. The reasons for staying involved—
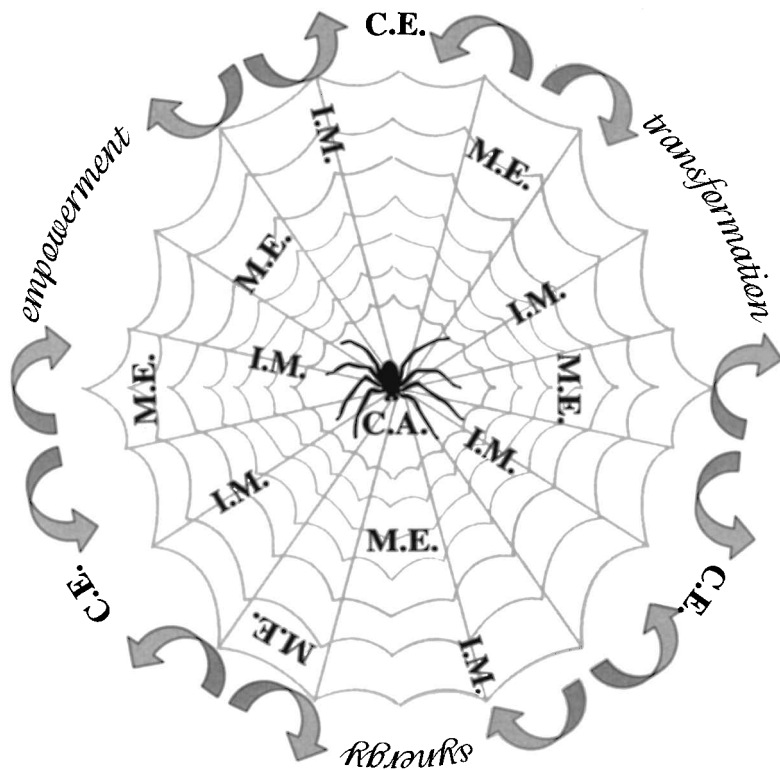
Coalition Attributes (C.A.)
- multi-institutional
- local team issues
- partnership meetings
- purposes form agendas

Initial Motivators (I.M.)
- matched organizational goals
- met organizational and
  personal needs

Motivating Elements (M.E.)
- satisfying goals
- strengthening the organization
- deriving personal benefits

Coalition Essences (C.E.)
- synergy
- empowerment
- transformation

Figure 1.   Web spinners: an organic view of change.

meeting goals, strengthening one's organizations, receiving personal benefits, and creating changed roles—serve as the connecting strands circling the web, creating an interrelated and connected whole.

Just as this interconnectedness among and between strands and circles brings wholeness to the web, the coalition has brought a blending of organizational network and national goals to create a unified but incomplete and constantly evolving whole. The soul of the coalition—synergy, empowerment, and transformation—are outcomes of membership in the coalition while also functioning as elements in creating the network. Thus they emanate from within and flow back into the web to recreate and to be recreated. The synergy of the coalition has created personal and organizational vision and transformation, just as the internal outpouring of the spider has been developed into a thing of light and creation. Membership in the coalition has empowered people and organizations. Like the spider, the coalition continues to adapt, weaving new webs that connect and reconnect participants and their organizations.

Using the spider web analogy, the coalition is constructed of loosely connected parts held delicately together through the experiences of the participants. The coalition members participate in making intellectual and emotional connections with others across their different professional, institutional, and interpersonal spaces. Each strand of the web is to varying degrees weak/strong but is resilient as a part of the interconnected whole. The whole in turn helps each of the individual parts to be synergistically alive. Just as a spider spins its web from its spinneret or internal self, the coalition members have created the coalition, bringing life to their individual PDSs and to the WALC itself. Although it is strong, our findings indicate that the coalition/spider-web is also fragile, subject to breakage inflicted by both internal and external forces. Yet, like the industrious spider, the members continue to create and recreate their connectedness and to keep a hopeful spirit.

Concluding thoughts about organizational creation

Through this study of the WALC network we have engaged in what might be considered a classic struggle between reason, or the logic of an enquiry, and soul, or the spirit of creative scholarship. On the one hand, we wanted to conduct sound scholarly research about leadership-based, professional networks. On the other hand, we were compelled to explore what is occurring within the people of the coalition and what they are doing, experiencing, being, and becoming. Through this tension, we have been brought to a more expansive research space whose limits have not yet been fully determined.

We have learned that the coalition can be understood as an organic process of change or as an experience that is happening to and being created by the members. Like the members, the coalition is being created and transformed internally. Both the people and the coalition are paradoxically something that has already been formed and yet is still in the process of becoming. Organizational networks become dynamic structures with soul

when the transformation is experienced directly by their participatory leaders. Although the coalition has provided the participants with a greater appreciation for educational reform, we also believe it has acted as a deep structure for allowing their values to emerge, coalesce, and inspire others.

Henry James (1984) reminds us that experience is neither limited, nor complete, and we are keenly aware that neither we nor the coalition members can ever grasp the entire web or experience of the coalition. However, like the coalition members, we have benefited tremendously from seeking to discover what has been created rather than pursuing a vision already defined for us. As researchers, we now have a broadened understanding of the coalition and a deeper appreciation of the participants and their strength of vision, power and action.

Our research into the essence of membership in the WALC leads us to conclude that this coalition functions as an innovative leadership model for promoting collaborative relationships, structures, and enquiry within and across each of the participating counties. A primary insight gained from this analysis is that people in the WALC partnership seem to want the opportunity to both lead and serve. They appear to have gained this opportunity through the partnership reform network. Implications of this study underscore the value of a multi-organizational approach to educational reform.

We have developed heightened awareness through this study that leaves us with a feeling of exhilaration and also a sense of incompleteness. The incompleteness we feel may be structurally related as 'the goal of PDSs is to invent and restructure schools in a process which never reaches a conclusion' (Weber 1996: 62). We believe that it is through energetic work with others that webs of connection can be created to bring personal and institutional wholeness to our profession.

Acknowledgements

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