

Collaborative practice insight five: Resilience

About this document

This is one of a series of Research Briefs that bring together learning from Education Development Trust (EdDevTrust)'s Schools Partnership Programme (SPP).

SPP is the largest collaborative school improvement programme in the country, with peer review at the heart of an active and growing national, self-sustaining, and school-led movement. SPP provides coaching and support to senior and middle leaders from across groups of schools committed to working together to improve, enabling them to:

- create and sustain a culture of collaboration and mutual accountability within and between schools;
- use evidence-based enquiry frameworks to contextualise and articulate their school improvement journey, whatever the focus; and
- employ peer review methodology with rigour and transparency to galvanise and measure change and improvement.

The programme is being evaluated by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), which is due to report in the summer of 2022.

These research-informed briefs report what school partnerships have discovered about working together through peer review and how their experience compares with wider research findings.

This brief explores how schools involved in SPP have drawn on relationships within their peer review groups during the period of the pandemic, and what they have learned about organisational resilience as a result.

Fire ants are not native to the southern United States, but they have successfully made a home there. They are tenacious, persistent – and resilient.

Faced with the existential threat caused by flooding in the region, the ants have a smart response. When water threatens to overwhelm their underground nests, the ants quickly carry their larvae and egg-laying queen – critical to their survival – to the surface. There, thousands of ants engage in an extraordinary act of collaboration. They link themselves together to form a giant living raft. The structure is robust, capable of enduring weeks on the surface of flood water if needed. Holding tightly together, the ants float to safety.

This is not a feat of “command and control”. No ant tells the others what to do. Each ant is autonomous, acting on the information it gathers from its closest neighbours. Acting as a network, they achieve what they couldn’t alone: they survive.

I’ve been a headteacher for 15 years and I have never had a situation that challenged my leadership skills in the way Covid-19 has. And that’s been the same for my colleagues



As school leaders reflect on what they've learned from managing their own disruptive threat – a global pandemic – the humble fire ant suggests an interesting hypothesis: are networked systems better able to withstand shocks and interruptions than looser collections of organisations? Are strong relationships the key building block of resilience?

Leaders engaged in the School Partnership Programme have been able to explore how relationships forged through peer review have helped them in times of extreme challenge.

Among them is Pip Utting, the headteacher of a large junior school in the London Borough of Kingston.

"(The pandemic) has been hugely challenging," she says. "I've been a headteacher for 15 years and I have never had a situation that challenged my leadership skills in the way Covid-19 has. And that's been the same for my colleagues."

As a local cluster of headteachers, Pip and her colleagues had always met regularly, planning joint activities, though they had never explored school improvement across schools. They decided to join SPP in 2018 along with 450 other schools around the country as part of an EEF trial on the effectiveness of the programme.

"The Schools Partnership Programme came along just at the right time," she says, "to crystalize our thinking and move us along the road to think about school improvement together."

When Covid-19 hit, she believes that the deeper relationships that were forged through peer review were especially valuable within her cluster of schools to help them support one another.

"Kingston is a small borough and our local authority is still

the glue for the schools," says Pip. However, she believes there is no doubt that being involved in the Schools Partnership Programme, being in each others' schools as a "supportive critical eye", has deepened relationships between those involved.

"That process definitely enabled my group within SPP to continue to have honest and professional conversations about the challenges of lockdown. The programme has given us the confidence to do that more among each other than I might do with another colleague who is not in my peer review group."

"There are differences between the schools in our group – but issues around staffing were the same; the issues around delivering free school meals were the same; and also the issues of keeping the school open through the holiday period. We shared ideas on how we approached them. Some of us formed a hub and there was real joined up and supportive work between us."

"We had coaching sessions together through Zoom to talk about the shared experiences and challenges that we were having. It was really helpful to share ideas and for reassurance."

Pip's experience is not unique. Her sentiments find an echo with school leaders across the SPP community.



In Milton Keynes, headteacher Paul Quinton believes that the relationships his school has developed with SPP partners have been incredibly important during Covid-19. He puts it simply: *"I'm not sure how we'd have got through it without the collaboration."*

In Berkshire, school leader Brandon Mills expresses a similar belief that SPP has fostered deep relationships that have contributed to organisational resilience. *"The four schools out of the Berkshire Alliance of Special Schools partnership that have been involved in SPP have had a much more honest and open approach to discussing risk assessment, sharing documents and making decisions during this time and this is down to the culture developed through SPP,"* he says.

In Barnet, Elena Print says that the group of schools in her partnership was very collaborative before engaging with SPP, but that peer review has helped cement that and strengthened links between the schools. The level of trust between schools has been *"massively beneficial,"* she says.

These local experiences find an echo nationally. Ben Bryant from the Isos Partnership examined the benefits derived by organisations by being part of a local interconnected system during the time of Covid-19. He was the lead author of the Local Government Association's Report, "Better Connected".

"During our research," he says, *"we heard many examples of the important work of partnerships of schools and settings in sharing practice and providing peer-to-peer advice, particularly in relation to day-to-day practice."*

REPORT: Better connected

How local education and children's services in England have responded to the coronavirus pandemic

"The pandemic has provided a stark reminder about the inter-connected nature of local systems. It has required a system-wide response to education, to keeping children safe, and to supporting vulnerable families. Local authority and school leaders highlighted numerous examples of where a local system response had been invaluable during the pandemic – these have implications not only for the pandemic response, but also for the work of local systems beyond the pandemic."

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION, 2021



Built-in resilience

SPP Associate Jane Creasy has spoken with school leaders across England to ask how their involvement in peer review made a difference during the Covid-19 pandemic.

“School leaders told me that it was the culture created by peer review that made the difference when the going got tough,” says Jane. “SPP is a highly collaborative process that requires a commitment to an open and non-judgemental culture. That ethos is extremely useful when organisations face common, potentially overwhelming challenges. They are able to engage in mutual support more readily and to find sustainable solutions to problems more quickly.”

Relationships already forged for one purpose became invaluable for another purpose, says Jane, although no one could have foreseen just how important that would become. She reflects: *“As part of SPP, we knew that building relationships was essential for effective peer review – we hadn’t realised so clearly that we were building organisational resilience at the same time.”*

Global consulting giant Deloitte believes that this is a trait of the most resilient organisations: they invest ahead of time in the processes and behaviours that will buttress them from future shocks. They prepare to be resilient.

Deloitte suggests that for organisations to be able to cope with disruption, careful planning is needed before a crisis happens. Resilient organisations invest in a culture that embraces foresight and flexibility. *“To keep running with agility and flexibility in a challenging environment,”* says Deloitte, *“resilient organisations demonstrate five attributes – and for those to work for you, they need to work together.”* (See inset box).

After preparedness, Deloitte’s four other resilient traits – being adaptable, collaborative, trustworthy and responsible – align closely with characteristics that schools often acquire through the practice of peer review.

For example, reflecting on her own experience of SPP, Jenny Aylen from Barnet Junior School Alliance believes that the process of peer review itself enables school leaders to develop new skills that make them more adaptable and agile in their thinking.

“The core skills of the SPP training, such as strategic thinking and evaluating evidence, have been particularly useful for leaders during Covid-19,” she says.

Five Traits of Resilient Organisations

- Prepared:** Plan new business models; diversify; invest in alternative ways of working.
- Adaptable:** Build around people who are agile, comfortable with ambiguity and able to change direction quickly if needed. Invest in technology.
- Collaborative:** Build organisations that can freely and easily share information and perspectives. Collaboration is important both within your organisation and externally with partners, peers and stakeholders.
- Trustworthy:** Stand by your staff and stakeholders in difficult times to earn their trust and strengthen relationships.
- Responsible:** Organisations committed to diversity, equity and inclusion also lead on resilience – perhaps due to having a broad range of perspectives to support innovative and agile thinking.

DELOITTE, MARCH 2021

This was especially relevant when leaders were evaluating research into curriculum and home learning to plan their provision. She attributes, in part, leaders' ability to develop a robust response – at speed – to the skills acquired through SPP training.

Ann Davey, meanwhile, highlights the role that SPP plays in building trust within and between schools. Ann is the CEO of the Pathfinder Schools Multi-Academy Trust in Northamptonshire.

"SPP is conducted with trust in the real sense of the word, at the heart of the process," she says, "allowing you to reveal your school 'warts and all' in the safe knowledge that the group genuinely wants to help solve those really trying problems".

In a time of crisis, when resilience was tested to the extreme, such trusted safe places proved invaluable for many.

Reaching out

Maggie Farrar, SPP Lead Associate, welcomes the parallels being drawn between characteristics of resilient organisations and schools that are involved in peer review. The extreme challenges of the pandemic revealed a useful lesson, she believes.

"Too often, 'resilience' is interpreted as needing to be tough and thick-skinned – that the tougher we are, the more resilient we'll be," says Maggie, "but the organisations that fared best during the pandemic were those that reached out to each other and understood that sharing – and addressing – their vulnerabilities together made them stronger. The most resilient organisations acknowledged it would be difficult and that there would be setbacks. They didn't attempt to hunker down and simply try to endure what was happening around them, they found solidarity and strength in working together".

Writing in the Harvard Business Review, Keith Ferrazzi and his colleagues concur with Maggie Farrar's suggestion. They examined why some organisational teams proved to be more resilient during the pandemic than others. The answer, they concluded, had more to do with self-awareness and empathy than grit and determination.

Resilient teams exhibit candour, says Ferrazzi. *"(They) are able to speak truth to each other in order to*

collectively identify and solve the challenges they face."

They are also resourceful, able to rebound from setbacks and welcome new challenges. *"They devote their energy to solutions and remain focused on outcomes regardless of external conditions,"* says Ferrazzi.

Directly challenging conventional notions of resilience, Ferrazzi believes that resilient teams are high in compassion and empathy. *"Team members truly care for each other and share both success and failure."* For such teams, resilience is expressed in a deep commitment to *"co-elevating"* the team rather than seeking individual recognition of success.

Finally, says Ferrazzi, resilient teams exhibit humility. *"Resilient teams are willing to admit when a problem has become intractable and ask for help. They do not hide their struggles but lean into the group responsibility for facing challenges and finding solutions."*

His findings could easily have come straight from an SPP handbook¹.

1. To explore this theme further, investigate "SPP Collaborative Practice Insight 3: People and Skills", which examines how peer review can liberate colleagues to have challenging conversations in a supportive context.



Innovation in adversity

If the behaviours and cultures engendered by peer review served school leaders well in a time of crisis, how did the process itself fare? Could SPP itself prove to be resilient in the face of system-wide disruption?

“When the pandemic hit, we knew that school leaders were facing many of the same challenges in a fast-changing landscape. Most were looking to each other and local systems for guidance and support rather than top-down systems,” says Anne Cameron, Programme Lead at Education Development Trust.

“Since SPP exists to help schools address the most significant issues they face together, arguably it was needed more than ever in the pandemic. We knew we had to adapt peer review to the new environment, to make it relevant to immediate challenges.”

Retaining the values and principles of SPP, a virtual system of peer review was created, based on familiar methodologies re-invented for new circumstances. The

adapted process was sharper, more rapid and relevant to the new areas of enquiry driven to the surface by the pandemic.

So what did the experience tell the SPP team about resilience?

First, it confirmed that agility and an ability to be forward-looking are key to resilience.

“From our very first trials, we found that virtual peer review is much more do-able than we had originally thought,” says Anne. *“In many ways it’s an improvement on the face-to-face approach. It’s easier to set up focus groups, less disruptive to the school day and there’s more flexibility in the approach.”*



FOUR Cs: How SPP Contributes to Organisational Well-Being

A sense of control: we need to have agency in our lives at work. As part of our SPP approach, teachers and leaders at all levels have agency and control over the focus and process of SPP peer review and the actions taken as a result.

A sense of community: we need the opportunity to work with others on things that matter to us. Relationships are at the heart of SPP. A coaching culture underpins the programme and school leaders and teachers can be open and transparent.

A sense of commitment: we need to feel connected to a higher purpose in our work and why we do the job we do. SPP helps articulate a shared commitment to collective moral purpose in action.

A sense of challenge: we need to feel challenged without being overwhelmed.

Challenging issues are addressed in a non-judgemental, transparent, and robust manner with a commitment to a 'no blame' climate in any part of the review.

Adapted from: Mental health and the coronavirus: A best practice guide to protecting the mental health of the workforce

(SEIDL 2020)

Proving that resilience can be about seizing new opportunities as much as managing unexpected challenges, as the pandemic recedes, schools are already exploring blended approaches to future peer review cycles.

Second, virtual peer review in 2020 shone a light on issues that turned out to be critical to organisational resilience in a time of crisis. In particular, organisational well-being is being examined with fresh – more knowing – eyes.

Anne's colleague, Maggie Farrar says: *"Since the beginning of SPP, we have been guided by Michael Fullan's warning that 'isolation is the enemy of improvement.' The whole point of peer review is to prevent schools being isolated. The pandemic reminded us that isolation is also the enemy of well-being; and about the fragility of support systems when faced with major challenge. As a result, we are integrating well-being more explicitly into SPP and how it is considered within peer review – both for individuals and organisations. Our thinking in this*

area has been influenced by the work of the Mercer Group, which identifies four areas – four 'Cs' – that the group argues are critical to employee engagement, organisational well-being and effectiveness." (See inset box).

Finally, virtual peer review has given school leaders wider access to the whole school system, no longer limited by practical questions of geography. In one pilot, school leaders from Devon, Essex and Greater Manchester were able to work together, widening the pool of knowledge and expertise available to add value to peer review.

Plymouth headteacher Heidi Price took part in the pilot and is clear about the possible benefits: *"Virtual peer review allows schools to share good practice and promote school improvement activities across a national landscape. The potential for future development in this area is huge."* Virtual peer review can harness the power of the school system for the good of the school system.

As long ago as 2015, John Hattie was urging school leaders to make greater use of the wealth of knowledge that exists in teacher communities, in the way that virtual peer review may enable more easily. A more connected school system is a more effective – and resilient – system.

“One of the major limitations in education,” wrote Hattie, *“is that we have little interest in scaling up successful ideas.”* Too often, he suggested, teachers preferred to argue that ‘my class is unique.’

“It just cannot be that every teacher is unique; it just cannot be that every student is unique; it just cannot be that we do not know successful practices that have probabilities of success,” he argued.

With its evidence-based methodology, SPP was already, in part, a response to Hattie’s call for a more evaluative approach to school improvement. Now, the advent of virtual peer review creates the opportunity to add even wider system-thinking, enhancing the resilience of the larger education system, as well as its effectiveness.

Resilient by design

It is difficult to overstate the disruption to the school system caused by the first truly global pandemic ever known. Its impact on the lives of young people and school staff was both immediate and, for some, also likely to be long lasting.

And yet it also revealed latent strengths in the school system – not least, the benefits of collaborative relationships when faced with common challenges. It revealed, too, an ability for speed. Schools leaders proved resilient through nimble thinking and being quick on their feet.

As the pandemic recedes, can schools retain these newly demonstrated skills? Can they be nimble and resilient by design, not just in the face of threat?

In the United States, school districts from New York to California are grappling with just this question. The Resilient Schools Project is a practitioner-led initiative (pre-dating the Covid-19 pandemic) that is now gathering learning from the last year to think through solutions to long-term challenges collectively. With a close resonance with SPP, the project’s mission is to *“unite those on the front lines (in schools), managing multiple challenges, to learn from each other and improve.....no matter where and how school is done.”*

“Whether the crisis is global like a pandemic or localized such as extreme weather, the fact remains that future disruptions to school as we’ve always

known it and done it are inevitable,” says the project. *“Yet, with planning and flexible teaching modalities, schools and school districts can adapt quickly to changing situations while continuing to provide students with a high quality learning experience unrestricted by time or location.”*

What it means to be resilient

- Resilient schools are prepared to navigate crises.
- Resilient schools have accessible plans and confident leaders.
- Resilient schools have equipped teachers.
- Resilient schools have empowered students who are 21st Century ready to become the location-independent workers of the future.

Resilient Schools Project Interim Report
January 2021

Reflecting on new ways of working quickly adopted by schools during the pandemic, one of the project's members urges leaders to learn from recent experience: *"Keeping the flexibilities in place is critical for us to use the changes brought due to the pandemic as a lever for the future of education. If we go back to the same old way we did schooling, then we are destined to repeat the same failures from the past."*

In the UK, that process is already being enabled through SPP peer review. Focus-Trust, a multi-academy trust based in the north of England, has used its 2021 peer review cycle to investigate how digital technologies contributed to improving its curriculum, teaching and learning and wider school efficiencies. The process will help the trust to decide what to "adapt, adopt or abandon" from the range of new practice developed at speed during the pandemic.

Trust CEO Helen Rowland says: *"The pandemic and subsequent lockdowns.....fast-tracked our digital strategy. Our peer reviews celebrated the remote education we provided through lockdowns and bubble closures and how we are using new technology to reduce workload and create efficiencies, for example through document sharing and virtual parents' meetings. As we move forward, we keep challenging ourselves to ask: 'to what extent is our offer equitable for all children.'"*

Beyond education, the business world, too, is grappling with the challenge of how to recover effectively – and more resiliently. Writing in the Harvard Business Review, Martin Reeves and Kevin Whitaker advise organisations to see advantage in diversity by adjusting to new realities.

They suggest six actions that organisations can take to become more resilient and able to bounce back quickly in the face of disruptions, big or small. (See inset box).

How to become a more resilient organisation (Reeves and Whitaker, Harvard Business Review)

Seek advantage in adversity	Don't merely endeavour to mitigate risk or damage or restore what was; rather aim to create advantage in adversity by adjusting to new realities
Look forward	Crises can also be the best pretext for accelerating long-term transformational change. One of the key roles of leaders is to shift an organisation's time horizons outward.
Take a collaborative, systems view	Resilience is about how the relationship between an organisation and its context change under stress. It requires system thinking, therefore, which in turn requires collaboration.
Measure beyond performance	Don't simply measure past performance – measure flexibility, adaptability and other components of resilience.
Prize diversity	Resilience depends on being able to generate alternative ways of reacting to events, with an ability to see things with fresh eyes. Resilient organisations value variation and divergence.
Change as the default	Resilience is less about being able to survive extreme, occasional events, and more about building organisations that are comfortable with constant change and experimentation. They seek iterative incremental adjustments in response to their environment.

Reimagining a better school system

Back in the southern United States, fire ants may offer a final lesson about resilience.

Researchers discovered that raft-building was not the ants' only survival trick. Faced with heavy rain, the ants used the same networking strategy to form a tower over the entrance to their nest – a living umbrella. Researchers even found that the ant structure had the same mathematical formula used in the building of the Eiffel Tower, ensuring that it could sustain its own weight efficiently.

In other words, the ants are able to deploy their network differently according to the nature of the challenge, adapting to circumstance.

So too, school leaders engaged in SPP are already considering how they can leverage their peer review networks to adapt to new circumstances and reimagine a better school system.

Pip Utting and her headteacher colleagues in Kingston are already thinking about how peer review can help them understand and consolidate their learning during the pandemic.

"I think it will be very helpful to use the SPP model to take a look across your whole community and your school and to plan for the future," says Pip. "I want to use my next review to look at an aspect of that - especially in relation to the well-being of our children and wider communities."

"None of us know what the future holds," she continues. "We need to learn the lesson about how we've managed (the challenges of lockdowns) and make changes so that we can be better prepared. The (Schools Partnership) Programme can help us review and look at some of the things we did as a group to know what worked best – so we always have a back-up plan."

The next in this series of Collaborative Practice Insights will examine how peer review can help schools unlock the desire for a radical reimagining of our school system, building on lessons learned during the pandemic. Look out for it in Autumn 2021.

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