The Power of Professional Learning Networks
Traversing the present; transforming the future

Graham Handscomb

Chris Brown
Graham Handscomb
Graham is Honorary Professor with University College London (UCL) and Visiting Professor at Bolton University. He was Professor of Education and Dean of The College of Teachers. He has an extensive career of senior leadership of local authorities and schools and 20 years' teaching experience. Graham has made a considerable contribution to the development of school-based practitioner enquiry and pioneered the concept of the 'research engaged school'. He wrote the criteria to establish the national Research Mark Award for the National Foundation for Educational Research. Graham was a member of the National College for School Leadership ‘Networked Learning Communities’ assessment panel. He led the creation of the National Discipleship Training Programme for the United Reformed Church.

As an educational consultant, he works with schools, teaching schools alliances and trusts throughout the UK and has also a range of international experience including developing teacher and leadership development programmes in the UAE and in Wuxi and Suzhou, Jiangsu, China. He is a fellow of numerous universities and organisations and was a senior member of Hughes Hall, University of Cambridge. Graham is editor of Professional Development Today and on the editorial boards of a number of journals, including Creative Teaching and Learning, and the Journal of Contemporary English Teaching and Learning in Non-English Speaking Countries.

Chris Brown
Chris is a Professor in Education and Deputy Executive Dean (Research) at Durham University. He is seeking to drive forward the notion of professional learning networks as a means to promote the collaborative learning of teachers, with the aim of improving both teaching practice and student outcomes, not only in individual schools but also in the wider school system. Chris has co-edited one book in this area, Networks for Learning: Effective Collaboration for Teacher, School and System Improvement (Routledge, 2018); he is co-editor of the Emerald’s Professional Learning Networks book series (and has also contributed one book to this series), and is co-founder and co-convener of the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement’s Professional Learning Networks research network.

Chris was recently awarded a significant research grant by Bosch Foundation to examine the effectiveness of area-based reforms: in themselves a specific form of PLN. In 2018, Chris was also awarded the prestigious Siftung Mercator Foundation Senior Fellowship.
The Power of Professional Learning Networks
Traversing the present; transforming the future

Graham Handscomb and Chris Brown
## Contents

**Acknowledgements**  7

**About the contributors**  9

**Networks make a difference**  17
Graham Handscomb and Chris Brown

**Part one: Insights, structures and systems**  25

The role of networks in supporting school improvement  27
David Hopkins

Fostering collaboration across schools around the world: insights from TALIS  43
Pablo Fraser and Gabor Fulop

Change, adaptation and transformation: peer review and collaborative improvement during the pandemic  59
Anne Cameron and Maggie Farrar

Networking small rural schools in the pandemic  75
Toby Greany and Andy Wolfe

A new paradigm for professional development and performance management  91
John Baumber

Reframing teacher development in uncertain times: new spaces, new collaborations, new purposes  111
Jane Jones
Big Education: collaboration for change 127
Liz Robinson, Ellie Lister, Joe Pardoe and Rosie Clayton

Disrupters, innovators, changemakers: the global WomenEd network 151
Vivienne Porritt with Lisa Hannay and Liz Free

A digital asset: understanding your value and new possibilities in a pandemic/post-pandemic world 169
Kate Bancroft

Dynamic, urban professional learning networks 179
David Woods

Part two: Flourishing practice 191

Creative collaboration: professional learning in and through the arts 193
Steven Berryman

Discovering professional identities: a networked theatre in education approach to support early career teachers 203
Chris Bolton

Covid-19 driven emergence of an informal network to support vulnerable students 219
Dana Braunberger and Sarah Hamilton

Scottish Island Schools Network: bringing the remote rural voice to networked professional development 233
Suzie Dick and Stephanie Peat

Global networking for sustainable futures: collegiality and intellectualism as network norms 249
Alexander Gardner-McTaggart and Paul Armstrong

Creating a virtual staffroom: dynamic and organic CPD conversations with colleagues, at a distance 265
Haili Hughes

Grassroots professional learning networks 277
Richard Holme
Teacher research groups: enhancing teacher professionalism during the pandemic 289
Daniel Langley

Networking inside and out: using student voice to improve professional practice 303
Marcella McCarthy

Professional learning in adult education: crucial roles and future actions of networks and networking 315
Sandy Youmans, Lorraine Godden and Hanne Nielsen Hamlin

Concluding reflection: What next for professional learning networks? 325

Collaborative caldrons 327
Graham Handscomb and Chris Brown

Index 331
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our contributors for accepting the challenge and delivering their fantastic chapters. We have learned a lot and we know the readers of this book will too. What this compilation shows is that professional learning networks have the potential to radically improve how teachers learn, connect and professionalise, as well what is needed for professional learning networks to endure and flourish in the long term. Hopefully this understanding will now provide the catalyst for educators and system leaders to embrace and support professional learning networks to grow into an intrinsic part of the educational ecosystem. We look forward to seeing how this process unfolds.
About the contributors

Paul Armstrong is a senior lecturer in Education at the Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester. He has over 15 years of experience in educational research exploring contemporary forms of educational leadership and management, in particular the means by which schools and school networks are managed and resourced. His most recent publication is *School-to-school collaboration in England: A configurative review of the empirical evidence* with Chris Brown and Chris Chapman. He is also editor-in-chief of the journal *Management in Education*.

Dr Kate Bancroft is a senior lecturer at Carnegie School of Education and has been a course director for several postgraduate and undergraduate courses in education and the study of childhood. Kate is also an external examiner for the University of Newcastle and the University of Greenwich, examining both universities postgraduate provision in education-related subject areas. Kate’s research focuses on the study of sex and gender; she is currently researching domestic abuse in England and its impact on adult female victims and their children. Kate led two online voluntary networking events during the peak of the pandemic in summer 2019, which had over 300 attendees at both.

John Baumber has enjoyed over 35 years of school leadership, including an executive head position in three Bolton high schools before moving to lead schools in Sweden and the US. John is, at present, director of the International Centre for Educational Leadership and School Improvement at the University of Bolton. He retains his responsibility for supporting the network of 75 Kunskapsskolan-inspired schools in the UK linked to the global network of schools sharing a goal-driven, personalised pedagogy that ensures students take agency and ownership of their learning.
Dr Steven Berryman is Director of Arts, Culture and Community for Odyssey Trust for Education, UK. He is also a visiting research fellow at King’s College London. His research and teaching focuses on arts and cultural education, in and beyond school settings, and the professional development of teachers and leaders.

Dr Chris Bolton is a senior lecturer in drama education at Birmingham City University and is the Route Leader for PGCE Secondary Drama in Initial Teacher Education. He is also the Research Coordinator for the Secondary and Post-Compulsory Adult Education department. Before this role, he worked in secondary schools in Birmingham as a drama Advanced Skills Teacher. He has a keen interest in how drama can create spaces for meaningful dialogic learning by using artful approaches to pedagogy and the impact of collaborative networking to develop professional teacher identity/identities.

Dana Braunberger is a university instructor and co-leads research in a K-12 school. She brings over two decades of experience in K-12 schools as a teacher, school principal, and chief performance officer. Her research interests include professional learning networks, research practice partnerships, professional learning, innovation, learning differences, and self-regulation.

Anne Cameron is SPP Programme Lead for Education Development Trust’s Schools Partnership Programme (SPP), providing operational leadership and driving end-to-end delivery and development. She works closely with a highly experienced team of associates to ensure the quality, impact, authenticity and sustainability of the programme and its positive contribution to the sector.

Rosie Clayton is Project Manager at Rethinking Assessment, UK, where she coordinates the movement, which is being incubated by Big Education. The movement brings together state and independent schools, universities, researchers, employers, policymakers and education experts who are seeking to make our assessment system more equitable and fit for purpose. Rosie started her career in education setting up Studio Schools and UTCs, and has recently worked on system scale projects for the RSA, Ashoka and the World Innovation Summit for Education.
About the contributors

Suzie Dick was the deputy headteacher at the only secondary school on the Isle of Arran, Scotland, and is now a lecturer in Education at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. She is the instigator of the Scottish Island Schools Network and current vice chair of International Professional Development Association Scotland with her key research interests including outdoor learning, rural education and practitioner enquiry.

Maggie Farrar was the director of Leadership Development and Research at the National College of School Leadership. She is an associate of Education Development Trust involved in the design and development of the Schools Partnership Peer Review Programme. She works internationally on the development of school-led, collaborative, self-improving systems.

Pablo Fraser is an Educational Policy Analyst working in the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) at the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills since 2018. He has been involved in comparative and international research concerning teacher professional development, teaching practices, and teacher wellbeing.

Liz Free is a Global Strategic Leader of WomenEd. Liz was the founding director of the British School in Netherlands Leadership Academy and is CEO and Director of International School, Rheintal. Liz is a global board member of TES and has chapters in 10% Braver: Inspiring Women to Lead Education and Being 10% Braver.

Gabor Fulop has been working as a statistician and analyst at the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) of the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills since 2018. His area of expertise concerns large-scale database analysis and advanced data modelling.

Alexander Gardner-McTaggart works at Manchester Institute of Education, School of Environment, Education and Development, University of Manchester. He is Programme Director Educational Leadership in Practice, Convenor Comparative and International Educational Leadership Research Interest Group (British Educational Leadership and Administration Society), and visiting professor at
Franz Kepler University Linz, Austria. His research interests include educational leadership and global crises of climate, inequity and knowledge generation and international schools’ leadership.

**Lorraine Godden** is an instructor at Carleton University where she teaches career development and employability skills courses. Her research is rooted in understanding how educators interpret policy and curriculum to make sense of career development and employability, work-integrated learning, adult education, and other educational multidisciplinary and public policies.

**Professor Toby Greany** is convener of the Centre for Research in Education Leadership and Management (CRELM) at the University of Nottingham. His research focuses on how policy and practice interact to shape educational opportunities and outcomes, in particular across local systems and through networks, and the role of leadership in these processes.

**Sarah Hamilton** is a doctoral student at the University of Calgary and a research lead at Calgary Academy, a K-12 independent school in Alberta. She brings over 17 years of experience working in K-12 education across Canada to her work. Sarah’s research interests include mathematics education, self-regulation and executive functions, research partnerships, collective knowledge building and professional learning, including PLNs.

**Lisa Hannay** is a Global Strategic Leader of WomenEd and a senior leader in a high school in Calgary, Canada. Lisa is also a chapter author in *Being 10% Braver*.

**Richard Holme** is a lecturer in education at the University of Dundee, Scotland. He researches informal, teacher-initiated, grassroots professional development and learning. He is a qualified teacher with experience in primary, secondary and adult education sectors.

**Professor Emeritus David Hopkins** is chair of Educational Leadership at the University of Bolton. He completed his school improvement trilogy with the publication of *Exploding the Myths of School Reform*;
the previous books being School Improvement for Real and Every School a Great School. He was recently ranked as the 16th most influential educator in the world by the American-based Global Gurus organisation.

**Haili Hughes** was an English teacher and now works as Head of Education at IRIS Connect and as a senior lecturer on Sunderland University’s PGCE English programme. Her research interests are mentoring, retaining experienced teachers and English teacher’s professional development through subject knowledge and collaboration. She has published three books and has two forthcoming.

**Jane Jones** is Head of Modern Foreign Languages Teacher Education at Kings College London (KCL). She has published internationally on topics including assessment, language teaching, EAL, wellbeing, school leadership and teacher development. Jane supports teachers to develop as socially-aware teacher-researchers and critically reflective practitioners through diverse teacher learning opportunities.

**Daniel Langley** is an assistant headteacher with responsibility for teaching and learning and professional development. He is an EdD candidate at UCL Institute of Education. His research has been published by the Chartered College of Teaching, the Foundation for Educational Development and in the Journal of Eton College.

**Ellie Lister** is Programme Lead at Big Education, UK, where she heads up Big Education’s leadership development offer. She has a background in training and adult learning within education and is passionate about the need for a different type of leadership within schools – one that both challenges the status quo and creates psychologically safe environments to do so.

**Dr Marcella McCarthy**, author of The Spider Strategy: Six Steps to Outstanding and Coaching and Mentoring, has worked in schools ranging from special measures to outstanding, and is a former headteacher and university lecturer. Her current research interests include metacognition, staff wellbeing and empowering student voice.
Hanne Nielsen is a retired superintendent of education with the Simcoe County District School Board (SCDSB) in Ontario, Canada. Portfolio responsibilities included adult and continuing education, partnerships, and eLearning strategic development. Hanne’s professional focus was on measuring the collective impact of programmes and services and meeting strategic priorities.

Joe Pardoe is Strategic Content Creator at Big Education, UK. Joe began his education journey by teaching in Japan and China before moving to Hull as a teacher with Teach First. He later moved to School21 to become head of humanities, head of project-based learning and later had a wider curriculum role. Joe now works for Big Education helping to spread the learning from our schools into the system.

Stephanie Peat is a Scottish primary teacher and Lead Specialist Of Professional Learning and Leadership at Education Scotland, supporting the professional learning and development of educators at a national level across the Scottish system. Stephanie currently leads the Teacher Leadership Programme, a developmental programme that supports teachers to explore what leadership means at classroom level and can look like in practice. Stephanie is also a doctoral student at the University of Strathclyde, her key research interest is teacher identity.

Vivienne Porritt is a leadership consultant supporting professional learning, impact evaluation, strategy, and women’s leadership. She is vice president of the Chartered College of Teaching and a Global Strategic Leader of WomenEd, an organisation that empowers and connects women leaders. She is the co-editor of 10% Braver: Inspiring Women to Lead Education and Being 10% Braver.

Liz Robinson is co-director and co-founder at Big Education, UK where she works with schools and leaders across the country to inspire change, design new approaches and grow an engaged network. A former headteacher and now system leader, Liz’s passion is holistic approaches to education and leadership, as well as being a proud mum to Ella and Alys.
Andy Wolfe is the Executive Director of Education for the Church of England. This involves leading the national education work with around 4700 schools and overseeing the Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership, which provides programmes and networks, including the Peer Support Network, which has grown to around 1500 schools.

Professor David Woods CBE has been a teacher and senior leader in schools, a teacher trainer in higher education and a local authority adviser in two LAs. He was Chief Education Adviser for the City of Birmingham before joining the Department for Education in England as Senior Education Adviser, working closely with ministers to develop educational policy and, subsequently, becoming head of the department’s advisory service. He joined the London Challenge programme from the beginning as the lead adviser and then became the chief adviser for London schools and the London Challenge. He has the unique distinction of having been the Chief Education Adviser for England’s two biggest cities, Birmingham and London. From 2011 to 2018, he chaired the London Leadership Strategy as an Education Trust. He has written and spoken extensively on educational leadership.

Dr Sandy Youmans is an adjunct professor at the Faculty of Education, Queen’s University. She has co-led multiple CESBA funded studies of adult and continuing education in Ontario. Dr Youmans documented the work of the Eastern Regional Partnership for Adult Education during their implementation of the Adult Education Strategy (2016–2019).
Networks make a difference

Graham Handscomb and Chris Brown

The power of networking

Networking has long been an important and often crucial feature in education. This is because what can be learned by individuals is necessarily enabled or constrained by the networks within which we are immersed, with networks also determining with whom we will collaborate (Castells 2010). As they enable us to learn and engage, the more general aims of education networks typically include:

- **Facilitating a more willing distribution of professional knowledge** (Hargreaves 2010; 2012; Muijs 2015). In other words, networks can be used to foster knowledge sharing, collaboration and practice development. This can be especially useful in plugging ‘structural holes’ through access to expertise that is not available to individual teachers or in individual schools (Huxham and Vangen 2005; Muijs 2015).

- **The development of context-specific strategies for improvement** (Hargreaves 2010; 2012; Howland 2015). For instance, networks might have a focus on addressing challenging circumstances and/or persistent issues of inequity and underperformance, i.e. ensuring all students, irrespective of background, gain the minimum skills necessary to function in today’s society (Arkhipenka et al 2018; Armstrong et al 2021; Brown 2020; Muijs et al 2010).
• **Facilitating schools and others to share resources** more efficiently than they might previously have done, or to achieve economies of scale and reductions in risk from resource pooling (Azorín 2018; Ehren and Godfrey 2017; Gilbert 2017; Hargreaves 2010; 2012; Howland 2015).

• **Fostering of esprit de corps, wellbeing and mutuality.** One of the interesting features of recent crises like the pandemic, which have enforced separation, has been the drive to reconnect and develop new ways whereby teachers and schools can engage together. Networks, particularly using online technology, enable the creation of new spaces where teachers can connect and develop a common purpose and, indeed, a sense of belonging. Such fora can provide a new meeting ‘place’ not only for the exchange/sharing of knowledge but also to bolster a sense of identity, self-efficacy and worth (Trust et al 2016; Riley 2022).

• **Facilitating new ways of being a profession.** As the landscape of school organisation has changed, with the demise of third-tier local authority models of governance, schools and teachers have sought to carve out other means to connect as a profession (Matthews et al 2011; Wilkins 2015). Creating new, often online, networks have provided alternative means for the expression of professionalisation.

Traditionally, networks were facilitated through top-down initiatives, for instance, London Challenge, or those put in place by the Tower Hamlets Local Education Authority, as they sort to improve educational outcomes for the most disadvantaged (Ainscow 2014; Woods et al 2013). However, we are now witnessing an increasing emergence of bottom-up practice, self-directed by practitioners and schools. We can trace this shift to recent changes to educational structures, where there has been a dismantling of previous ways of working and the introduction of new approaches with an individualised focus. Although this is occurring in education systems worldwide (e.g. see Hargreaves and Shirley 2012), England, which has experienced a recent and sharp decline in the support role offered to schools from government, provides an exemplar case of such trends (Armstrong et al 2021; Greany 2017; Handscomb 2018). We only need to travel back 12 years in the past to the publication of ‘The importance
of teaching’ white paper to encounter the coalition government’s newly-discovered faith in inter-school collaborative networks. This was set very much within the context of portraying schools as needing to address the creative tension between the notions of autonomy, diversity and collaboration (Mourshed et al 2010; Handscomb 2013).

At the same time, it is recognised that the realisation of the kind of ‘self-improvement’ envisaged in ‘The importance of teaching’ typically emerges from establishing a ‘culture of professional reflection, enquiry and learning within and across schools, [centred] on teaching and student learning’ (Gilbert 2017:6). It is no surprise, therefore, that increasing numbers of school leaders and policymakers are now turning their attention to professional learning networks (PLNs) as a way of improving education in schools and across school systems (Armstrong et al 2021). The principle focus of any PLNs is on the core educational concerns of driving improvements to teaching, learning and student outcomes. As such, the aims of any given PLN can range from exploring and seeking to improve specific teaching practices, to engaging in a critical examination of the purpose and the aims of the curriculum. PLNs can vary in composition, nature and focus: they may consist of teachers and school leaders from different schools, educators and local or national policymakers, educators and other stakeholders as well as numerous other potential combinations. Often networks will also form in partnership or involve joint work with academic researchers. Ultimately, however, irrespective of composition or focus, the priority aim of PLNs is to build capacity, which is defined as ‘the power to... sustain [the] learning of all people at all levels of the educational system’ (Stoll 2010:470).

**Dynamic professional learning networks**

Now more than ever, however, it seems that the age of professional learning networks has well and truly arrived. The rise and proliferation of digital communication, coupled with the circumstances enforced during the pandemic experience, has led to a dynamic re-imagining of PLNs.

This is explored across the rich range of experiences, testimonies and thinking provided in this book, with chapters exploring:
• the professional learning vistas opened up through digital opportunities;
• the sense of new ownership, voices and partnerships at the heart of networks, bubbling up from groups of practitioners;
• the consequent transformation in the form and structure of professional learning networks;
• how they have become vehicles for radically different forms of professional development and learning;
• a focus upon enhancing teachers’ identity and sense of wellbeing;
• new openings for the expressions of professionalisation and of the profession speaking to itself; and
• fundamental implications for professional learning network designers and leadership.

The impact of online developments is considerable. There is a sense of a dramatic shift from the hitherto collaborative contribution of traditional learning networks to what Bancroft describes as becoming a digital asset to others and, indeed, to oneself. In networking from one’s home, it is argued that there may be greater freedom and transparency. Similarly, Dick and Peat describe how the emergence of a digital community of practice helped to empower and connect rural Scottish island communities. Often the pandemic experience precipitated a sudden transitioning to remote learning and – as Youmans et al explain – provided powerful mitigation to the challenges they faced as adult educators. Indeed, within the pages of this book, we gain a nuanced picture of how professional learning networks of schools drew on their established collaborative cultures, systems and processes to move towards online engagements. As Cameron and Farrar testify in their experience of virtual peer review, it led to ‘greater system-wide agility, adaptability and innovation’.

Perhaps one of the most significant developments in the nature of networking has been the movement away from top-down models of PLNs towards the emergence of bottom-up approaches. So, for instance, Holme explores the role of grassroots professional learning groups and informal networks in contrast to top-down control and Porritt et al report on the phenomenal expansion of WomenEd networks across
Networks make a difference

the world, concluding that ‘this networking liberates women’. Hopkins spotlights how ‘autonomous schools who are free to work collaboratively together can spur innovation and sustain the drive to innovate, as well as enhancing student achievement’.

Such autonomy enabled Robinson and her colleagues, within the space of a year, to build a hub of learning, which was a site filled with blogs, events and resources, and to ‘generate tangible improvements in education on the ground’. For some, the experience of the pandemic proved to be a great leveller where, as Jones describes in her chapter, teachers took the initiative and ‘provided spaces for a diversity of learning formats, in groups, networks, on social media platforms, individualised research, across subjects as well as within subject’. She identified the benefits of online formats of networking as not only enabling more extensive professional learning within and between schools but also free and extensive access to global learning communities.

This burgeoning of grassroots network activity has, in turn, led to radical challenges to the structure, coordination and orientation of PLNs. Woods describes how networks within urban communities created a new organisational sense of place and shared purpose. They helped address common concerns and challenges facing teachers and schools, such as working with disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. The WomenEd networks confronted organisational and systemic bias through the spontaneous sharing of women’s lived experiences and new collaborative mechanisms such as coaching and ‘unconferencing’. McCarthy highlights how the relatively neglected network of student voice was developed to fuel significant curriculum and pastoral change. Meanwhile, Hopkins sees PLNs having the potential for ‘re-inventing’ the ‘middle tier’ of school governance ‘by promoting the focus on learning, linkages, and multi-functional partnerships’. This is echoed in Greany and Wolfe’s declaration that ‘there is an important role for networks alongside formal professional development programmes in England’s fragmented school system’.

At the heart of such alternative structural forms of networking are particular values that, in turn, promote distinctive purposes and practices. Gardner-McTaggart and Armstrong observe that there is an emphasis on collegiality rather than competition, which builds ‘mutual understanding, respect and recognition, providing a powerful space that
facilitates professional growth’. Similarly, Braunberger and Hamilton
describe how teachers reached beyond their schools to self-organise
into a dynamic informal professional learning network. Baumber is
adamant that the pandemic, and the accompanying emergence of new
modes of connection and networking, have questioned the status quo
and challenged what has not been working. In particular, he argues
that teacher wellbeing has become a critical imperative in schools and
calls for professional development programmes adopting a personalised
approach, facilitated through networking.

This focus on wellbeing, personalisation and identity is taken up by
a number of contributors as they explore the raison d’être of networking.
In the context of arts education, Berryman explains that teachers’
sense of identity working within this field will drive the nature of their
professional learning activities and the characteristics of the networks
such educators join or create. Bolton reflects that the pandemic has
provided time and space to deepen our critical understanding of what
being a teacher means. He contends that this ‘exploration of new teacher
identity and pedagogy […] is intentionally in marked contrast to the
quick-fix-disco-finger techniques’ promoted by some educationalists! In
their detailed OECD analysis of networking, Fraser and Fulop examine
the relationship between teachers’ engagement in collaborative activities
and self-efficacy and job satisfaction, as well as how school environments
support these engagements.

Linked to this view of networks promoting self-efficacy is their
potential to provide a vehicle for expressions of professionalisation.
Cameron and Farrar emphasise the importance of how professional
agency, solidarity and continuous learning in networks all hang together.
This creative interplay is also evident in Hughes’ description of how a
YouTube channel for English teachers from across the country facilitated
informal professional conversations that were both dynamic and organic.
Likewise, Langley suggests that the collaborative learning that took place
through the networking of his teacher research groups ‘provided teachers
with opportunities to enhance their own sense of professionalism’.

The dynamic nature of learning networks and the potential they
offer has significant implications for leadership. Jones records how
the hiatus of the pandemic led to teachers rising to the challenge in
undertaking instructional leadership roles. Greany and Wolfe found
in their evaluation of two regional networks developed by the Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership that, as well as the sharing of resources and building relationships with other school leaders, the networks enabled strategic reflection on the nature of leadership itself. Along with other chapter contributors, they identified core skills for network designers and facilitators.

We hope you find this book provides a stimulating insight into the current experience of professional learning networks and the transformative difference they are poised to make in future educational development. Join the debates on these and any areas you think we may have missed using the hashtag #PLNs.

References


Part one:
Insights, structures and systems
The role of networks in supporting school improvement

David Hopkins

Overview
The international evidence is clear that autonomous schools that are free to work collaboratively together can spur innovation and sustain the drive to innovate, as well as enhance student achievement. However, when educational policies, as in England, focus on autonomy, hierarchies and marketisation then both excellence and equity at the system level are compromised. The forms of networking and collaboration described in this chapter that focus on learning at a range of levels, provide a means of facilitating school improvement, as well as contributing to large-scale reform. They also offer the potential for ‘reinventing’ the ‘middle tier’ in terms of school governance, by promoting the focus on learning, linkages, and multi-functional partnerships.

Keywords
Autonomy
Networks
Professional development
School improvement
System reform
Teaching and learning
The power of professional learning networks

In reflecting on what’s next for professional learning networks, it is important to remember that the construct has a distinguished provenance in education. Over the years, there has been much international interest in the role of networks in supporting school improvement (Wohlstetter et al 2003). Unfortunately, there are also various misconceptions of the network concept, particularly in terms of how policy can affect practice. Although networks bring together those with like-minded interests, they are more than just opportunities to share ‘good practice’. The following definition of networks emerged from my early analysis of effective networks for the OECD (Hopkins 2003):

‘Networks are purposeful social entities characterised by a commitment to quality, rigour, and a focus on outcomes. They are also an effective means of supporting innovation in times of change. In education, networks promote the dissemination of good practice, enhance the professional development of teachers, support capacity building in schools, mediate between centralised and decentralised structures, and assist in the process of re-structuring and re-culturing educational organisations and systems.’

In looking to the future of networks in professional learning and school improvement, this definition still holds much validity. Its implications will be discussed in more detail as the chapter progresses. In doing so and in developing the argument of the chapter, we will:

- review the international evidence on successful systemic educational reform in terms of policies for autonomy and networking.
- situate the discussion of networks in their contemporary context in England.
- present three cameos of successful networking initiatives.
- propose criteria for effective networking for school improvement.

The global evidence on autonomy and networking

The educational policy direction in many developed countries has changed quite dramatically in the recent past. There has been a rapid shift away from the government managed educational changes of
The role of networks in supporting school improvement

the 1990s and 2000s to far more decentralised systems based on the principle of ‘autonomy’. This is not to say that reforms and strategies of that period have not worked, indeed, in retrospect, they have been extremely successful in raising standards and decreasing the variation of performance in the system. As it became apparent in England, there is a limit to the impact that can be achieved by top-down reforms and another way has to be sought (Hopkins 2007).

In many jurisdictions, this other way is called ‘autonomy’ and is often driven by reasons and forces other than those educational. The most influential driver recently was the meltdown in global economic systems since 2008 that was coupled with an ideological desire from many governments for the ‘small state’. These irresistible forces were at times also coupled with a genuine belief that there is a need to unleash the power of the profession that has previously been harnessed by too much control. There are some arguments to support such a policy direction, but there are also some caveats to be entered too. It is foolish to think that simply adopting a policy of autonomy that dismantles existing system structures and gives unfettered freedoms to schools will work by itself.

Andreas Schleicher (2018:114) in his authoritative text on World Class school systems, comments on the findings of recent OECD research:

‘But all (these systems) flourished because governance and oversight arrangements gave them the freedom to create spaces for experimentation.’

‘A (recent OECD) study also underscored the risk of autonomy leading to the “atomisation” of schools. Working with others can spur innovation and sustain the drive to innovate.’ ‘However, school autonomy will be self-defeating if it is interpreted as functioning in isolation. Instead, autonomy should take the form of freedom and flexibility to work with many partners.’

Schleicher (2018:117) further adds:

‘But more than that might be needed. PISA data show that in school systems where knowledge is shared among teachers, autonomy is a positive advantage; but in school systems without a culture of peer
learning and accountability, autonomy might actually adversely affect student performance. There needs to be enough knowledge mobilisation and sharing and checks and balances to make sure academies are using their independence effectively – and wisely.’

It is evidence like this that led me to develop a framework for ‘networked autonomy’ (Hopkins 2013). Autonomous networked schools:

- put in place substantive collaborative arrangements.
- understand they are as strong as the weakest link. Schools that are failing and/or underperforming can expect to receive unconditional support from all network schools, as well as from commissioned external agencies.
- support and accept significantly enhanced funding for students most at risk.
- operate within a rationalised system of national and local agency functions and roles that allow a higher degree of coordination for this increasingly devolved system.

Such a set of principles allow schools to use ‘networked autonomy’ to:

- more fully express their moral purpose of enabling every student to reach their potential.
- ensure that every teacher has the maximum time to teach and to develop their professional competence.
- maximise resource allocation to ensure that this happens.
- explore the full potential of the ‘inside-out’ school development strategy.
- enable leadership to work more effectively with the system both within and outside the school and generate sustainable networks that deepen the impact on student learning.
- move from external to professional forms of accountability.

**The contemporary context in England**

The discussion in the previous section focused on what we know about effective networking and the apparent tension with policies that emphasise autonomy. In reflecting on the policy situation in England
and informed by the PISA data, Schleicher (2018:116) is sceptical about how ‘granting greater school autonomy (would) actually lead to better school performance’. He continues:

‘The academies show how important it is to combine professional autonomy with a collaborative culture, both among teachers and among schools. The challenge for an academy-style system is to find a way to share knowledge among schools. Knowledge in the field of education is very sticky; it does not spread easily.’

In their extensive and well-grounded research *Hierarchy, Markets and Networks*, Toby Greany and Rob Higham (2018:10) analyse the ‘self-improving school-led system’ agenda in England and examine the implications for schools. They describe their research as follows:

‘This report analyses how schools in England have interpreted and begun to respond to the government’s “self-improving school-led system” (SISS) policy agenda. While largely undefined in official texts, the SISS agenda has become an overarching narrative for schools’ policy since 2010, encompassing an ensemble of reforms on academies, the promotion of multi-academy trusts (MATs), the roll back of local authorities (LAs) from school oversight, and the development of new school-to-school support models, such as teaching school alliances (TSAs).’

The SISS concept was originally and elegantly outlined by David Hargreaves (2010; 2011; 2012) in three highly influential monographs. In commenting on the new model of national teaching schools in England, as part of his vision of the self-improving school system, Hargreaves (2011:5) says:

The new teaching schools, based on the concept of the teaching hospital, are to be a critical element in a more self-improving school system. They will:

- train new entrants to the profession with other partners, including universities.
- lead peer-to-peer learning and professional development, including the designation and deployment of the new specialist leaders of education (SLEs).
• identify and nurture leadership potential.
• lead an alliance of other schools and partners to improve the quality of teaching and learning.
• form a national network to support the schools in innovation and knowledge transfer.
• be at the heart of a different strategy of school improvement that puts responsibility on the profession and schools.

To Hargreaves, the SISS was designed to be genuinely transformative, empower schools and lead to enhanced equity in student performance. In this respect, his proposals echoed Schleicher’s analysis that is already referred to. The irony is that the Department for Education also claimed that their policies introduced using the SISS rhetoric would also lead to a lessening of centralised control and enhanced autonomy. The reality is that it has done nothing of the sort as these following quotations from Greany and Higham’s (2018:12–16) book demonstrate:

• With academisation, powers of school oversight are moving from local to national government. This process has been uneven and often fraught. [...] The picture that emerges is of chaotic centralisation, characterised by competing claims to authority and legitimacy but diminishing local knowledge about schools. (Ibid:12)

• That new local and regional markets in improvement services are particularly incentivising a focus on the types of knowledge and expertise that can most easily be codified and commoditised (as ‘best practices’) rather than on the joint-practice development and learning processes advocated by Hargreaves (2012) as essential for a SISS. (Ibid:14)

• MATs are commonly referred to as a form of partnership, but we argue that this is inappropriate given a common definition of partnerships as ‘legally autonomous organisations that work together’. [...] We argue MATs are best understood in terms of ‘mergers and acquisitions’, with prescribed models of governance and leadership largely derived from the private and, to a lesser extent, voluntary sectors. (Ibid:15)

• MATs have been encouraged to grow or merge by the DfE, in search of efficiencies and ‘economies of scale’. However, our statistical