

FORMALISE, PRIORITISE
AND MOBILISE

EMERALD PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORK SERIES

In the current international policy environment, teachers are viewed as learning-oriented adaptive experts. Required to be able to teach increasingly diverse sets of learners, teachers must be competent in complex academic content, skilful in the craft of teaching and able to respond to fast-changing economic and policy imperatives. The knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for this complex profession requires teachers to engage in collaborative and networked career-long learning. The types of learning networks emerging to meet this need comprise a variety of collaborative arrangements including inter-school engagement, as well as collaborations with learning partners, such as universities or policy makers. More understanding is required, however, on how learning networks can deliver maximum benefit for both teachers and students.

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FORMALISE, PRIORITISE AND MOBILISE

How School Leaders Secure
the Benefits of Professional
Learning Networks

BY

CHRIS BROWN

University of Portsmouth, UK

AND

JANE FLOOD

Netley Marsh C of E Infant School, UK



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Chris dedicates this book to Cindy Poortman: my partner in crime and co-pioneer of the current tranche of research into Professional Learning Networks.

Jane dedicates this book to all those who continue to learn, challenge, support and inspire others, especially Kates.

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1 The British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (BELMAS) is an independent voice supporting quality education through effective leadership and management: see <https://www.belmas.org.uk>.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Chris Brown is Professor of Education at the School of Education and Sociology, University of Portsmouth, UK. Along with Dr Cindy Poortman (University of Twente) Chris is seeking to drive forward the notion of Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) as a means to promote the collaborative learning of teachers. The aim of this collaborative learning is to improve both teaching practice and student outcomes, not only in individual schools, but also in the school system more widely. To this end Chris and Cindy have co-edited one book in this area, *Networks for Learning: Effective Collaboration for Teacher, School and System Improvement* (Routledge, 2018); they are co-editors of Emerald's *Professional Learning Networks Series* (of which this book forms part); and are founders and co-conveners of the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement's *Professional Learning Networks research network*. In July 2019, Cindy and Chris, along with Alan Daly (University of California, San Diego) and Joelle Rodway (Memorial University of Newfoundland), will also co-convene a conference entitled *Professional Learning Networks in Education: Tearing Down Boundaries for School and System Improvement*. Funded by the American Educational Research Association and hosted by University of California, San Diego, the aim of the conference is to advance research into and so enhance the impact of PLNs in relation to both school improvement and educational change.

Alongside his research into PLNs Chris also has a long-standing interest in how research evidence can and should, but often does not, aid the development of education policy and practice. To that end, he has authored six books, including *Achieving Evidence-Informed Policy and Practice in Education* (Emerald Publishing, 2017), scores of papers and has presented and keynoted on the subject at a number of international conferences in Europe, Asia and North and South America.

Jane Flood has been an Infant Teacher for more than 20 years, working in a variety of schools in various roles; from supply teacher to Deputy Head, in one-form entry Infants to large inner city Primaries. Achieving an MA(Ed) in 1998, completing a Best Practice Research Scholarship 2001–2002, a Recognition in Excellence in Inquiry Based learning in Science Education (IBSE) Certificate in 2014, and in 2018 becoming a Founding Fellow of the Chartered College of Teaching, throughout her career Jane has engaged in school-based research, designed to raise pupil outcomes and involving the dissemination of this learning to colleagues. Jane has recently started a PhD at the University of Portsmouth, focusing on ways to manage the competing priorities of teacher researchers and informal leaders in Research Learning Networks. She is currently Head of Learning at Netley Marsh C of E Infant School.

THE EMERGENCE OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORKS

In the current international policy environment, teachers are viewed as learning-oriented adaptive experts. They are required to be able to teach increasingly diverse sets of learners, and to be knowledgeable about student learning, competent in complex academic content, skilful in the craft of teaching and able to respond to fast changing economic, social and policy imperatives (de Vries & Prenger, 2018; Schleicher, 2012). It is clear, however, that the entirety of the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for this complex teaching profession cannot be developed fully through the provision of initial teacher education programs alone (de Vries & Prenger, 2018). Collaborative career-long learning is therefore required. It is also apparent that '[t]he increased complexity of a fast changing world has brought new challenges for schooling that are too great for those in any one school to address by itself' (Stoll, 2010, p. 4). The rise of these challenges has been coupled with an increased emphasis worldwide on education systems that are 'self-improving and school-led'; with a concomitant focus on school leaders to drive forward

school improvement (Greany, 2014). In response, educators and policy makers are increasingly turning their attention to networked forms of teacher learning and professional development as a preferred way of improving education provision (Poortman & Brown, 2018). For example, Armstrong (2015) suggests the move towards networked collaborative learning as a means of improvement is prevalent in a range of countries including: England, the United States, Canada, Finland, Scotland, Belgium, Spain, India, Northern Ireland and Malta.

While the focus on networked forms of professional development is evident amongst policy makers (OECD, 2016), it is similarly reflected in academia. Here educational researchers, such as Hargreaves (2010), Greany (2014) and Stoll (2015), argue that learning networks are *fundamental* to achieving effective educational improvement. What is more, educators learning, both from colleagues and others (e.g. university researchers), is considered an effective way to support teachers in rethinking and improving their own practice (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Learning networks would thus appear to provide the opportunity to achieve cost-effective educational innovation and enhancement at scale (Greany, 2014; Hargreaves, 2010; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Munby & Fullan, 2016). As a result, it is argued that efforts at school improvement should now be framed within a broader context, moving from the school as a single unit to considering the connections between schools, central offices, universities and others in networks (Finnigan, Daly, Hylton, & Che, 2015; Greany, 2014; Stringfield & Sellers, 2016).

WHAT ARE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORKS?

Conceptualising the notion of learning networks more formally, Brown and Poortman (2018, p. 1) define *Professional*

Learning Networks (PLNs) as any group who engage in collaborative learning with others outside of their everyday community of practice to improve teaching and learning in their school(s) and/or the school system more widely. Brown and Poortman's (2018) definition of PLNs is multifaceted and so encompasses a vast range of between-school or school-plus-other-organisation network types. These include research or data use teams, multisite lesson study teams, teacher design teams, whole-child support teams and so on (see Poortman & Brown, 2018). Importantly, PLNs can also vary in composition, nature and focus: they may consist of teachers and/or school leaders from different schools, teachers with local or national policy makers, teachers and other stakeholders and many other potential combinations. In many cases, networks will also form in partnership or involve joint work with academic researchers (Poortman & Brown, 2018).

Brown and Poortman's (2018) conceptualisation of PLNs is set out graphically in [Fig. 1.1](#). Here each black dot or white star represents an individual (e.g. a teacher or academic researcher). The arrows meanwhile represent connections and so flows of information or other forms of social capital that occur between individuals. As can be seen, there are two types of groupings of individuals represented in [Fig. 1.1](#). The first, demarcated by the dotted circles, is everyday communities of practice (e.g. a whole school or subject department or a university department). The second type of grouping – the mass of black dots in the centre of the diagram – represents a PLN. In the three communities of practice presented in [Fig. 1.1](#), the members of the PLN are those individuals who are represented by white stars. Thus, it can be seen that PLNs are comprised of individuals with connections that stretch beyond the dotted circles and into the network of individuals at the centre of the diagram. At the same time, as the number of white stars indicates, PLNs typically comprise a

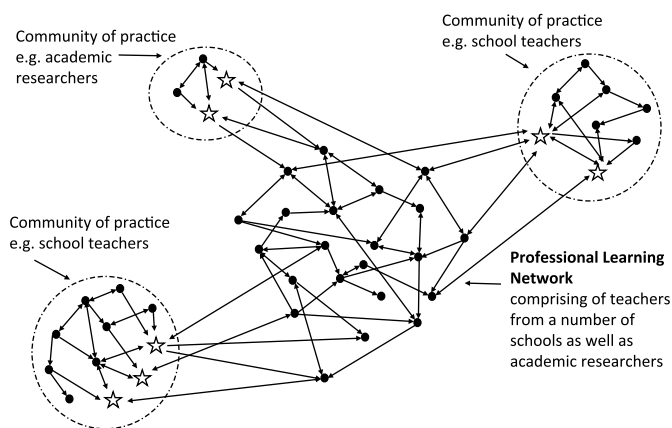


Fig. 1.1. A Graphical Depiction of PLNs.

Source: Brown and Poortman (2018).

small number of individuals from each community of practice rather than a whole school approach.

Research evidence suggests that the use of PLNs can be effective in supporting school improvement. In particular, studies suggest that teacher collaboration in learning networks can lead to improved teaching practice and increased student learning (Borko, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Vescio et al., 2008). Such improvements occur because effective learning networks are those that meet the necessary criteria for successful professional development (Desimone, Smith, & Phillips, 2013; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). In other words, effective PLNs involve the type of long-term collaboration that enables participants to draw down on the expertise of others in order to develop new approaches to teaching and learning. Nonetheless, despite this starting point that PLNs can significantly contribute to improved teaching and learning, harnessing the benefits of learning networks is not without challenge. In particular, it is noted by Poortman and Brown (2018)

that participation in learning networks does not *automatically* improve practice; the effects can sometimes be small and results have been mixed (e.g. see Chapman & Muijs, 2014; Hubers, Poortman, Schildkamp, & Pieters, in press; Lomos, Hofman, & Bosker, 2011; Prenger, Poortman, & Handelzalts, 2018). For example, research by Hubers et al. (in press) shows how, after external support was withdrawn, schools struggled with implementing the products of the PLN in question, as well as with keeping the PLN itself going. Correspondingly, Hubers and Poortman (2018) suggest that a number of supporting conditions need to be in place before PLNs can be successful (also see Katz & Earl, 2010; Lomos et al., 2011; Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). These conditions include *focus, collaboration, individual/group learning, and reflective professional inquiry*. In particular, however, is the vital role of leadership (e.g. see Harris & Jones, 2010; Muijs & Harris, 2003). In the first instance, leadership is required of the networks themselves to ensure that they function effectively (Briscoe, Pollock, Campbell, & Carr-Harris, 2015). Second, however, it is also the role of senior leaders to ensure that there is meaningful participation by their teachers in network activity and that this participation makes a difference within teachers' 'home' schools. Of these two aspects of leadership, it is that latter that is explored in this book.

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN SUPPORTING PLNS

Extant literature suggests a number of key characteristics have been identified as important in relation to effective leadership, including (Day & Sammons, 2013, 5):

1. Providing vision.
2. Developing, through consultation, a common purpose.

3. Facilitating the achievement of organisational goals and fostering high-performance expectations.
4. Linking resources to outcomes.
5. Working creatively and empowering others.
6. Having a future orientation.
7. Responding to diverse needs and situations.
8. Supporting the school as a lively educational place.
9. Ensuring that the curriculum and processes related to it are contemporary and relevant.
10. Providing educational entrepreneurship.

What is less clear, however, is how these characteristics might apply to ensuring that the benefits to schools of engaging in PLN activity are maximised. For example, it is vital that the PLN activity leads to long-term change within participating schools. As Hubers and Poortman (2018) note, this requires a two-way link to be established between the work of the PLN and the day-to-day teaching practice taking place within those schools. This link comprises two aspects: first, to maximise the benefits of being part of a learning network, PLN participants need to engage effectively in networked learning activity. Second, teachers (and other relevant staff) within the wider community of practice will need to know about, engage with, apply and continue to improve the products and outputs of the PLN; ultimately with the aim of improving student outcomes. To achieve such a link, however, requires senior leaders to understand how to meaningfully support both participation within PLNs and the mobilisation of PLN practice by teachers within their school. For example, school leaders need to ensure that for participants, the work of the PLN is prioritised appropriately in relation to other day-to-day

demands. Also that resource (e.g. teacher supply/teacher cover) is provided to ensure that PLN work is considered an integral part of, rather than in addition, to the day job (Farrell & Coburn, 2017; Hubers & Poortman, 2018; Rose et al., 2017). Senior leaders also need to understand how mobilisation can be embedded as a part of school culture (e.g. that communication pathways exist: Farrell & Coburn, 2017); how to ensure that mobilisation is facilitated by organisational routines (Farrell & Coburn, 2017; Rose et al., 2017); and understand how to ensure that appropriate support is available. To date, how school leaders support engagement in and the mobilisation of PLN activity within their schools is sparsely reported in the literature. To address this gap in the knowledge base, and to further develop our understanding of the role of senior leaders in maximising the benefits of schools engaging in PLN activity, this book examines a case study of a specific type of PLN: Research Learning Networks (RLN).

RESEARCH LEARNING NETWORKS

The notion of Research-informed teaching practice (RITP) refers to the process of teachers accessing, evaluating, and using the findings of academic research in order to improve their teaching practice (Cain, Wieser, & Livingston, 2016; Walker, 2017). RITP is increasingly considered by many to be the basis for effective teaching and learning as well as for high-performing education systems (Furlong, 2014; Rose et al., 2017; see Gorard & Siddiqui, 2016; Walker, 2017; Wisby & Whitty, 2017). Correspondingly, achieving RITP at a systemic level has become the focus of many school systems worldwide (Coldwell et al., 2017; Graves & Moore, 2017; Wisby & Whitty, 2017). In keeping with the current focus on RITP,

RLNs are a specific type of PLN designed to enable the roll out of new RITP at scale (Brown, 2017a). RLNs operate by establishing one (or more) PLNs with participants from a number of schools, then using these participants to generate research-informed practices as part of a series of network workshops. Participants then work with their wider school colleagues to embed these practices in their ‘home’ schools. By way of example, in the first iteration of the RLN model, 14 RLNs were formed, comprising 110 staff from 55 primary schools in England. Here it was intended that this networked approach would ultimately lead to the introduction of new practices amongst some 500+ teachers, benefitting some 13,000 students overall.

There have been some recent criticisms regarding the appropriation of the idea of RITP by those interested in using it as a way to champion the notion of ‘what works’; along with a corresponding privileging of methodologies such as randomised controlled trials and meta-analysis (e.g. see Wisby & Whitty, 2017; Wrigley, 2018).¹ It is worth highlighting at this point, therefore, that the RLN approach comes with no inherent focus on research relating to ‘what works’ outcomes, but rather is concerned with helping teachers, schools, and school leaders use a range of research to improve a wide spectrum of outcomes for children. What these outcomes might comprise includes aspects of *bildungsbegriff*,² children’s physical and mental well-being and their fortitude, as well as more instrumental notions such as children’s learning and academic performance. These outcomes could be improved through the development of new research-informed practices – which might be regarded as more technical in nature – but also through the development and sharing of new values, concepts, and ideas in relation to the role and purposes of education (which can again be influenced by research, such as comparison studies or theories regarding the purposes of