



The Networked School Leader

How to Improve Teaching and Student Outcomes using Learning Networks

Chris Brown

THE NETWORKED SCHOOL LEADER

It will come as little surprise to anyone who has ever worked in a school or who has read anything about teacher CPD that providing opportunities for teachers to collaborate and undertake professional learning together can lead to increased teacher job satisfaction, more effective teaching practice and improved pupil outcomes. But the keyword here is CAN – we also know that many forms of professional learning, including collaborative professional learning, fail to have a meaningful or long-term impact on teaching and learning. The devil is in the detail, in the implementation – and that is why this latest book from Chris Brown is so powerful. It offers key insight into the role of school leadership in harnessing the power of professional learning networks, and through a combination of theory and case studies of two professional learning network (PLN) approaches helps us begin to understand how such principles might work in practice. Picking up on often-neglected elements of the process – including how the learning from PLNs is shared and mobilised through the wider school – it highlights the conditions for success in collaborative professional learning (and the inhibitors of it!), providing a detailed view of not just the potential benefits of developing and engaging in PLNs but also the substantial challenges for school leaders in doing so effectively.

— *Cat Scutt, Director of Education and Research,
Chartered College of Teaching*

The great strength of *The Networked School Leader* is its comparative aspect. Chris Brown explores his ‘formalise, prioritise and mobilise’ advice to school leaders who want to harvest the full potential of professional learning networks by drawing on his studies of networks in England and Germany. These diverse examples help to illuminate how and why networks can be powerful mechanisms for supporting learning and innovation within and across schools, but also why their leadership is challenging and why they so often fail to achieve their full potential.

— *Professor Toby Greany, Chair in Education,
University of Nottingham*

This timely book is essential reading for school leaders looking to engage and collaborate with others. Written with a focus on lived experiences, Chris offers a compelling case of the benefits when leaders support learning networks in their schools, offering sound and realistic recommendations for how to do so.

— *Ruth Luzmore, Head teacher – Primary, St Mary Magdalene Academy, London*

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How to Improve Teaching and Student
Outcomes Using Learning Networks

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*For my good friend and colleague, Alan Daly, who first
introduced me to the power of networks*

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In there [the labyrinth], Minos walled up the twin form of bull and man, and twice nourished it on Athenian blood, but the third repetition of the nine-year tribute by lot, caused the monster's downfall. When, through the help of the virgin princess, Ariadne, by rewinding the thread, Theseus, son of Aegeus, won his way back to the elusive threshold, that no one had previously regained, he immediately set sail for Dia (Naxos), stealing the daughter of Minos away with him...

— Ovid *Metamorphoses* Book VIII lines 152–182 translated
by Anthony S. Kline

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ABBREVIATIONS

KMK	Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs
NRW	North Rhine-Westphalia
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (England's school inspectorate)
<i>Pess</i>	The developing potential – empowering schools project (Germany)
PLN	Professional learning network
QUA-LiS	Quality and Support Agency of the State Institute for Schools
RITP	Research-informed teaching practice
RLN	Research learning network (England)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Brown is Professor in Education at Durham University, UK. He has a long-standing interest in how research evidence can and should, but often doesn't, aid the development of education policy and practice. In the past few years he has sought to drive forward the notion of Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) as a means to promote the collaborative learning of teachers, and to ultimately improve student outcomes. He has written and edited multiple books and papers on this topic, and is the co-founder and co-convenor of the *International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement's* Professional Learning Networks research network.

In 2018 Chris was awarded a Siftung Mercator Foundation Senior Fellowship, which allowed him to conduct the research that forms the basis of this book. Each year Siftung Mercator identifies and invites just six people worldwide to apply for one of its fellowships. Potential Fellows are identified by a panel as 'exceptionally talented and outstanding researchers and practitioners', and recipients are offered the space and freedom to devote themselves to exploratory and unconventional research and practical projects.

Chris was also awarded with the 2015 American Educational Research Association (AERA) 'Emerging Scholar' award, the 2016 AERA Excellence in Research to practice award and the 2016 UCEA Jeffrey V. Bennett Outstanding International Research award. This is Chris' eleventh book; he has also published hundreds of articles and regularly presents at conferences all over the globe.

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FOREWORD

Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) hold the promise of addressing many of the issues education faces now and in the future. Schools are expected to prepare *all* children for a fast-changing society, in an age of accountability as well as continuous (self-)improvement, while teacher turnover is a substantial problem in many countries. Teachers and school leaders feel PLN participation, for example: *broadens your view and sharpens your brain; is dynamic and inspiring, and helps to understand how students think*. PLN participation helps teachers to appreciate their job more and (finally) talk about their teaching again. It can help teachers rethink their practice to face the challenges of an increasingly complex society, together with teachers and school leaders from other schools, as well as researchers and other stakeholders.

In reality, the success of PLNs is not guaranteed, depending on a range of factors and processes that need to be in place before we can expect positive results. Since the launch of the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement PLN network in 2017, Chris Brown and I have worked with our members to further define PLNs, elaborate their theory of action and identify key areas of focus for further research. The first thing we agreed upon when talking about starting the network was to make sure we would have collaborative outputs regularly from the start, beyond Congress meetings and sessions. Our 2018 book *Networks for Learning* brought together insights into PLN processes, influencing factors and outcomes based on research by several PLN network members, and included an excellent discussion by Alan Daly and Louise Stoll to inspire us to take on further challenges in this important field. They identified several future directions to consider,

among which ensuring depth of learning as well as breadth; paying attention to the conditions to support relational space; and moving towards a systems perspective. In relation, school leadership is a vital factor. Teachers, and also school leaders themselves, often state that leadership support for PLN participation and sustainable implementation in schools could have been much better. *What* leaders should do *how*, exactly, is less clear. Facilitation is often mentioned as important, yet surely not sufficient.

The path from educators participating in PLNs to widespread application of PLN learning in their schools is not simple and linear. The positive quotes in the first paragraph are taken from interviews and questionnaires with participants in one of our own studies into 23 PLNs in the Netherlands, with participants from more than 90 schools across the country.¹ These same participants, however, including their school leaders themselves, reported little leadership support for PLN participation and further knowledge sharing within their school. Our data team research² also shows that school leaders can both hinder and enable the work of data use PLNs, and that good practices in this respect are still rare in general. This makes it hard to determine how school leaders can ensure meaningful PLN engagement and support their teachers with PLN participation, let alone ensure that other teachers engage actively in PLN products and outputs. More multilevel, mixed-method studies are needed to provide both detailed case information and multi-school generalisable information to show the extent to which PLNs are effective and why, and specifically into the school leader role. In the research conducted for this book, Chris Brown has used an extensive mixed-methods study to provide much-needed insights into the role of school leaders in making PLNs effective, and potential for improvement. As clearly explained by the in-depth case results and the final chapter reflections in this book, school leaders need to embrace distributed instructional ethical leadership, using prioritisation, formalisation and mobilisation as approaches to make sure that all school staff and students will benefit from the PLN in which their school participates. It is also acknowledged, however, that not all schools are in the most advantageous situations to do so, and what school leaders facing challenging circumstances need to be aware of.

Chris Brown has worked with teachers and school leaders from numerous schools in different countries to increase their use of research. With receiving the Mercator Fellowship and writing this book Chris shows to be a leading researcher in this exciting field, bringing together insights based on his long-standing interest in research use, educational leadership and PLNs. His keynotes, RLN workshops and books inspire me in my work with school leaders and teachers from primary to higher education.

Likewise, any school leader will be very inspired to *conquer the PLN labyrinth* to improve teaching and student outcomes after having read this book.

Dr Cindy Poortman
University of Twente

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INTRODUCTION

The German organisation *Stiftung Mercator* is an independent foundation that, amongst its other aims, seeks to increase the educational success of disadvantaged children and young people. Each year Mercator shortlists and invites just six people worldwide to apply for one of its fellowships. Potential fellows are identified by a panel as being ‘exceptionally talented and outstanding researchers and practitioners’ from relevant thematic areas. The purpose of the Mercator Fellowship programme is to offer selected fellows the space and freedom to devote themselves to exploratory and unconventional research as well as practical projects, usually for a six-month period. Previous fellows include advisors to former US President Obama and current French President Macron.

In 2018, I was invited to apply for, and was fortunate enough to receive, a six-month Senior Fellowship for the April 2019 to September 2019 period. The topic I chose as my focus for these six months was professional learning networks (PLNs). My work with my colleague Dr Cindy Poortman (University of Twente) has led us to define PLNs as any group that engages in collaborative learning across networks, in order to improve teaching, learning and children’s outcomes. Such improvements can occur both within and across schools. Our previous reviews of research in this area suggest that the use of PLNs can be effective in supporting the development of teaching practice and children’s learning.¹ In addition, that PLNs might be an effective way to enable schools to collaborate to improve educational provision in disadvantaged areas.² But studies also suggest that harnessing the benefits of learning networks is not without challenge. In particular, that participation in learning networks does not necessarily or automatically improve practice or

outcomes for children. What's more, there may be additional challenges, and so support required, to facilitate PLNs in areas of disadvantage: in other words, in those areas most in need of the type of turnaround development activity that PLNs can potentially provide.

My particular interest is on the role of school leaders vis-à-vis professional learning networks. It has been clear for a while that school leadership is a critical factor for creating and sustaining 'functional' schools.³ School leadership matters, with school leaders playing an important role with regards to school quality, improvement and student achievement.⁴ In addition, the impact of school leaders in supporting the successful implementation of major educational change efforts is considered significant.⁵ What is less clear, however, is exactly how school leaders – especially those leading schools in areas facing challenging circumstances – can ensure that the benefits to their school of engaging in PLN activity are maximised. Furthermore, given the demands of self-improving school systems, what is also increasingly required is support for leaders that can help them deliver effective and sustained system change. Again, little is currently known about what type of leadership support is required for PLNs and how it might best be delivered in order to improve educational outcomes for all children – but especially for those in schools serving areas of low social economic status.

Based on what we currently know, it has long been my argument that if PLN activity is to lead to long-term change within schools, a two-way link needs to be established between the work of the PLN and day-to-day teaching. This link should comprise two aspects: first, to maximise the benefits of being part of a learning network, teachers chosen to participate need to be able to properly engage with the network. Second, all teachers within participating schools will need to know about, input into, engage with and continue to improve the outputs of the PLN, ultimately with the aim of improving outcomes. This is because such a link should maximise all teachers' exposure to new and innovative practice and maximise their chances of mobilising this practice in their school. The improved teaching practice that results should then subsequently enhance children's learning. To achieve such a link, however,

requires school leaders to understand how to meaningfully support participation and input into PLNs and how to mobilise effective PLN practice. To date, how school leaders support engagement with PLNs, and how they go about mobilising PLN activity, is little reported in the literature. Likewise, what support school leaders might require to maximise the impact of PLN engagement is also little understood.

At this current time, the use of PLNs to improve teaching and children's outcomes is particularly advanced in England and Germany.⁶ As such, to address these knowledge gaps, I proposed to Stiftung Mercator that I should focus on examining case studies of two specific types of PLN that serve similar purposes. These are *Research Learning Networks (RLNs)* in England and learning networks forming part of the *Developing Potential – Empowering schools project* (also known as *Pess networks*) in Germany. My aim in examining cases of different PLN types has been to attempt to identify, not only context specific learning, but also whether generalisable insights emerge as to how school leaders in both countries – and beyond – can strengthen and improve collaborative networked systems of learning, as well as identify effective support for them to do so. By choosing to study PLN schools situated within areas of low socioeconomic status I also sought to ascertain whether there are any particular leadership actions or support received, or required, that seem most appropriate for harnessing the benefits of PLNs for these schools. In particular, so that schools that need it most can use PLNs to drive turnaround development.

As well as being fortunate enough to secure a six-month fellowship, I was also lucky that Emerald Publishing showed an interest in me writing a book based on my research. What you have in your hands, therefore, is the direct product of the intensive work undertaken over that six-month period. This includes: reading some 210 conference papers, journal articles, books and book chapters; interviewing 12 RLNs and 15 *Pess* participants; surveying some 41 teaching staff in four English schools participating in the RLN as well as exploring the survey data of over 800 German teachers whose schools had engaged in *Pess* networks. In addition, of course, came the task of analysing and synthesising these data in an attempt to make some sense of it, as well as trying to produce a text

that was both compelling and had something new to say. Living and working in a different country, as well as being able to see first hand how PLNs operate elsewhere, has been a fantastic experience. It is also one that I hope has delivered positive results, enabling me to provide food for thought as well as practical help in for school leaders seeking to establish, lead and sustain PLNs.

In writing this book, I found it most effective to divide the work into nine chapters. The content of these is outlined briefly, below:

- In Chapter 1, I set out the current context for PLNs, as well as the aims and purposes educators have for engaging in them. While the benefits of participating in learning networks seem *intuitively* clear, as I note above, these benefits do not always materialise. As such, I also use the chapter to outline the conditions for success for PLNs, those factors that are key if PLNs are to help secure lasting school-wide changes in practice and outcomes.
- As the focus of the book is on the role of school leaders, I use Chapter 2 to provide substantive detail on what we currently know about how school leaders can maximise the impact to their school of engaging in PLNs. Here I explore both *attitudes* and *actions*: the former relating to a need for an external focus and a desire to do the best for every child (not just those within one's own school). The latter, meanwhile, considers the issues relating to the formalisation and prioritisation of PLN activity⁷: in other words how to make PLN activity formally part of the way a school functions, and how to ensure it stays a key focus for the school.
- While formalisation and prioritisation are important, also key is mobilisation⁸: ensuring that the learning and practice development that occurs as part of the PLN process is effectively shared with and utilised by others. Mobilisation is both vital and complex! It is also something that is not as well known about by school leaders as it might be. I use Chapter 3, therefore, to explore the variety and effectiveness of different ways of mobilising innovation. I also consider who might be the most effective

people to act as mobilisers and so who should be selected by school leaders to take part in a PLN.

- Chapter 4 details how I engaged in the research process. In particular, the process of literature reviewing and how the case studies that form the centrepiece of the project were developed. I always believe it's important that researchers be explicit about what they have done so that we can learn about how we might do it better next time. This also allows the reader to judge the results according to the strengths and weaknesses they perceive in the research approach. At the same time, if methodology is not your thing, you can safely skip this chapter without this impacting detrimentally on your understanding of the rest of the book. You can also just skim through and hopefully pick up some of the key terms and information, which has been provided in 'reference' boxes for easy access and identification.
- Chapters 5 and 6 outline the case study findings for England and Chapters 7 and 8 provide the case study findings for Germany. For both case studies I begin by providing a detailed exploration of their policy contexts and other specificities. This is because both the operation of PLNs and the actions and behaviours of school leaders will be shaped by the wider environment in which they operate. Understanding context is a key part of getting to grips with the nature of any case, as well as any attempt to explain why things occur as they do. Following this, I then explore for each case, first interview data – looking at the attitudes and actions of school leaders and participants within the PLN – then whole school survey data, including, for the RLN, social network data. In doing so I seek to ascertain whether and how actions, attitudes or other school-level factors seem to be positively or negatively impacting on the success of schools engaging with PLNs and what conclusions we can meaningfully draw.

I conclude the book (in Chapter 9) by bringing together the lessons learnt from examining cases in both England and Germany. In particular, I examine whether there are more generalisable actions that can be established regarding the role of school leaders in

engaging with PLNs, particularly for disadvantaged areas. I also try and identify what support school leaders need – from training to resource – if networked learning activity is to truly deliver bottom-up system level change. It is hoped that, as a result of this analysis, this book provides a step change in our understanding of networked approaches to school development. Also, that this work might provide a catalyst for school and system leaders to begin using networks effectively.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the help and support of the following: (1) Dr Anja Jungermann and Dr Annett Schmeck (Stiftung Mercator) who championed my Senior Fellowship and supported me through my stay in Essen (Germany); (2) Professor Dr Isabell Van Ackeren and Dr Nina Bremm (Universität Duisberg-Essen) who also fully endorsed my application, hosted me at UDE from April to September, and helped me collect data on the *Pess* networks; (3) Jane Flood (PhD candidate at Durham University) and Stephen MacGregor (PhD candidate at Queens University, Canada) who helped with the collection and analysis of the RLN data, Thomas Löhr who helped with the collection of *Pess* data and Ruth Luzmore (PhD candidate at Durham University) who critically engaged with earlier drafts of the work; (4) the school leaders and staff in the RLN and *Pess* schools who generously gave up their time to be interviewed and surveyed; (5) Kim Chadwick (Emerald Publishing) who could see the value in publishing this work in a format most likely to be received by school leaders; and (6) last but not least my wife and daughter – Kitty and Tilly – who allowed me to undertake my German adventure in pursuit of new knowledge, and who supported my hope that this understanding can be used to change the lives of children and young people.

THE CURRENT CONTEXT FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORKS

Chapter Summary

This opening chapter explores why there has been an increasing focus on networks in education. It begins with a brief look at the role of networks in society more generally, drawing on the work of Zygmunt Bauman, a leading social theorist. But fear not, there is no deep sociological treatise lying in wait here. Rather this is done simply because it is useful to understand how the trends currently affecting education are actually not much different from what is happening elsewhere. Narrowing in on Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) specifically, I then look at why PLNs are thought to be capable of delivering educational improvements, both within and across schools. Finally, I outline some of the key factors that will determine whether PLNs are able deliver such improvements or fail in the attempt.

NETWORKS IN GENERAL

Before looking at schools and education systems, it is useful to briefly consider how networks, generally, are now both shaping and being shaped by society. To do so, I draw on the work of leading social theorist Zygmunt Bauman. In his seminal book, *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman argues that the challenges of the modern age, both in terms of their sources and their impacts, have a ‘global’ nature to them. The idea of *wicked* problems, for instance, describes those issues which are difficult to solve due to their multiple and often contradictory elements.¹ Examples of such issues include human-led climate change, poverty and disparities in the distribution of wealth, the rising volume of uprooted and displaced people, and the transformation of work and employment via various technologies such as artificial intelligence and automation. The global nature of such problems means that individual governments or institutions cannot, when acting alone, hope to tackle them.²

At the same time, Bauman argues that a feature of the modern age is constant change and the continuous replacement of the old with the new: ‘change is *the only* permanence, and uncertainty *the only* certainty’.³ The aim and expectation of this change is the ongoing pursuit of improvement. To achieve improvement, structures and systems are regularly dismantled and replaced with new ways of working in order to secure better results. Recent casualties of this process have been the social institutions that have typically provided social cohesion; for example, specific layers of government, trade unions, the church as well as the provision of universal services such as health. In their place stand deregulation, privatisation and the onus on individual agency over collective approaches; albeit with the expectation that individuals should use their agency to learn from the best practices of others.

It is clear, however, that what is and what can be learnt by individuals is enabled or constrained by the networks we are immersed in.⁴ Strong networks between individuals therefore lead to more potent opportunities to learn. Networks also provide a means through which collaborative coordinated action can be