From Actions to Interactions: the Role of Professional Networks within Reform Sustainability.

Problem statement and objectives
Research on educational change has thoroughly documented that the implementation of innovative practices is challenging, leading to diverse and often not sustainable practices (Coburn et al., 2012; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006). Variation in implementation practices seems to be the rule, rather than the exception. Precisely this variation puts specific questions to the forefront: How to explain that -from all attempts to change- a great deal does not generate the desired results over the long term? Our research aim is to develop, use, and refine an integrated model of reform sustainability that combines a focus on actor-related processes and structural tendencies.

Theoretical framework
Recent developments within educational change literature emphasize the need for a balanced approach to study the interplay between social actors and the structural reality in which they function more systematically (e.g., Bridwell-Mitchell, 2015). Instead of treating both as opposing ideas, this paper has the ambition to study the relationship between structure and agency in understanding reform sustainability. Following Coburn et al. (2012), we define sustainability in terms of “the degree to which teachers use reform-related practices in high-quality ways after support for these practices has dissipated”(p.140). The central research question is formulated as follows: “How, when, and under what conditions do professional networks contribute to (or constrain) the sustainability of educational reforms?”.

Methods and data sources
We conducted a meta-ethnography of qualitative studies: an interpretive epistemology in which findings of qualitative studies are translated into one another (Noblit & Hare, 1988). The search resulted in a final selection of 49 relevant articles. We systematically looked for similarities and differences between the identified metaphors, concepts, and themes and developed new interpretations.

Results
Firstly, the results present a clear conceptualization of the notion of reform sustainability and determined three shifts in the definition of reform and reform sustainability: (1) from reform fidelity (continuing to do the same thing, stability), to a focus on the importance of continual adjustment and mutual adaptation (reforms as moving targets, continuous change); (2) from end stage in a multistage model to building sustainability planning into earlier stages of educational reform; (3) from only quantitative to also qualitative measures (process indicators) of reform sustainability.
Secondly, we identify different conditions and approaches for designing professional networks, ranging from individual, organizational and relational conditions to monitoring and leadership.
Thirdly, conceptual/practical opportunities and challenges for understanding how professional networks can contribute to (or constrain) the sustainability of educational change efforts are listed and discussed.

Scientific and scholarly significance
This study contributes to theory development in the domain of educational reform sustainability by illuminating actors’ role in organizational change and by recognizing how actors are structurally framed by network configurations. It clarifies the need to move beyond the “agency-structure paradox” in the social sciences, by conceptually and empirically analyzing the interplay of both social actors and the structural reality they operate in (Weber & Glynn, 2006; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

Word count: 500

References


Appendix 1. Search syntax

#1 Professional networks

college school cooperation/ OR collegiality/ OR community involvement/ OR "communities of practice"/ OR cooperation/ OR educational cooperation/ OR intergroup relations/ OR interpersonal communication/ OR interpersonal relationship/ OR interprofessional relationship/ OR network analysis/ OR parent school relationship/ OR partnerships in education/ OR school community relationship/ OR social networks/ OR teacher collaboration/ OR team teaching/ OR teamwork/ OR (alliance* OR collaborat* OR collegial* OR (communit* ADJ2 (interorganizational OR interschool* OR intraorganizational OR interschool* OR involvement* OR learning OR organi#ational OR practice OR professional* OR school* OR teacher*) OR external ties OR ((interaction* OR relation*) ADJ1 (communit* OR cross-level OR interorganizational OR interschool* OR intraorganizational OR interschool* OR organi#ational OR professional* OR school* OR social OR teacher*))) OR internal ties OR network* OR nonsystem actor* OR partnership* OR school-to-school OR team*).ti,ab.

#2 Education

(elementary education OR elementary secondary education OR grade 1 OR grade 2 OR grade 3 OR grade 4 OR grade 5 OR grade 6 OR grade 7 OR grade 8 OR grade 9 OR grade 10 OR grade 11 OR grade 12 OR high schools OR intermediate grades OR junior high schools OR middle schools OR primary education OR secondary education).el. OR cooperating teachers/ OR elementary education/ OR elementary secondary education/ OR elementary school teachers/ OR grade 1/ OR grade 2/ OR grade 3/ OR grade 4/ OR grade 5/ OR grade 6/ OR grade 7/ OR grade 8/ OR grade 9/ OR grade 10/ OR grade 11/ OR grade 12/ OR high schools/ OR junior high schools/ OR lay teachers/ OR middle schools/ OR middle school teachers/ OR primary education/ OR public schools/ OR public school teachers/ OR secondary education/ OR secondary schools/ OR secondary school teachers/ OR teachers/ OR vocational education/ OR vocational education teachers/ OR vocational schools/ OR (elementary education OR highschool* OR junior high* OR K-12* OR K12 OR preuniversity OR pre university OR primary education OR school* OR secondary education OR teacher*).ti,ab.

#3 Educational reform

change strategies/ OR educational change/ OR educational development/ OR educational improvement/ OR educational innovation/ OR innovation/ OR instructional improvement/ OR instructional innovation/ OR teacher researchers/ OR (((change OR implementation OR improvement* OR innovati*) ADJ1 (curricul* OR education* OR effort* OR instructional OR organi#ational OR proces* OR program* OR school* OR teacher*)) OR professional development school* OR reform*).ti,ab.

#4 Reform sustainability

sustainability/ OR sustainable development/ OR longitudinal studies/ OR followup studies/ OR maintenance/ OR (continuation OR deep change* OR diffusion OR ((follow up OR followup) ADJ3 (study OR studies)) OR institutionalized OR institutionalization OR incorporation OR long-scale* OR longevity* OR longitudinal* OR long term* OR maintenance OR nonsustain* OR persistenc* OR scalab* OR scal* up OR sustaint* OR transfer*).ti,ab.