The role of school leadership for school improvement in Professional Learning Networks

Introductory abstract
A promising way to realize school improvement is through the work of professional learning networks (PLNs). This symposium focuses on the role of leadership in different types of PLNs. By leadership we mean the whole of leadership activities, competencies, and related organizational structures, rather than a single school leader. The first paper presents the results of a systematic review on the role of leadership in the sustainability of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). The second paper focuses on the role of school leaders in a PLN using a collaborative inquiry approach. The third paper focuses on the role of school leaders in a PLN consisting of members across different schools, who are collaboratively working on creating sustainable school improvement. The fourth paper focuses on leadership related to data use PLCs within schools. After the presentation of the papers, a discussant will reflect on their findings. To conclude, there will be time for questions from and discussion with the audience. This proposal fits with conference strand III “leading capacity for change”, as it focuses on leadership directing efforts to increase capacities for achieving and sustaining school improvement.

Paper 1: The role of school leadership in the sustainability of PLCs: A systematic review

Issue
Educational innovation is becoming more and more important. A good way to organize this is to implement professional learning communities (PLCs) in the school, which aim to improve the quality of education by teachers working together (Fullan, 2015; Lomos et al., 2011; Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). However, the hardest part of any educational innovation is not how to start, but how it will be sustained within an organization. Sustainability of PLCs can be studied by assessing to what extent the (aim of the) PLC has become an organizational routine (Spillane, 2012). Organizational routines clarify the extent to which an innovation is valued, and focus on the interaction among the school staff and school leadership (Feldman & Pentland, 2003).

Leadership is very important in educational innovation (Robinson et al., 2008). Different aspects of leadership for sustainability have been distinguished in the literature. For example, an important task of the school leader is to create an appropriate culture (e.g., Levin & Datnow, 2012); and explicit norms and expectations regarding the PLC's outcomes have to be formulated (Lange et al., 2012). Besides, both formal and informal leaders play a crucial role in stimulating focus, providing both intellectual and instrumental support, monitoring development, and disseminating information (Earl et al., 2006). The objective of this review is to examine what factors are defined in the literature in relation to school leadership for sustainability of PLCs.

Conceptual approach
A systematic review was performed in which electronic databases (Scopus, ERIC, PsycInfo and Web of Science) were searched for peer reviewed English- and Dutch-language articles, published between January 2001 and March 2017. We included articles which referred to a term related to sustainability, or in which effort was made to determine the extent to which (the aim of) a PLC continued after an initial period of implementation. Studies that reported only on initial implementation efforts or were purely narrative were excluded from the results.

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1 We view PLCs as within-school PLNs.
Main findings and conclusions
Preliminary results confirm the importance of school leadership for the sustainability of PLCs. While the schoolboard has an important role in adapting the school’s vision and norms in relation to the PLC, school leaders are responsible for direct interaction with the school staff. School leader involvement in the PLC, their expression of visions and norms, their support and facilitation appeared to be influential for organizational change. Additionally, creating support by means of shared leadership among teachers appeared to be crucial to spread the (message of) the PLC.

Organizational routines exist of ostensive (abstract idea of a routine) and performative (specific actions) aspects (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Insights in these aspects allow us to explore relations between structure and agency in practice (Spillane, 2012). To optimize the role of school leaders, but also the schoolboard, for sustainability of (the aim of) PLCs, the interaction between these aspects for the role of the schoolboard and school leaders should be examined in further research.

Paper 2: Complex educator judgment in leading professional inquiry

Issue
This qualitative study was designed to explore the judgments that school principals bring to the complex tasks of shifting learner outcomes through the application of a disciplined approach to collaborative inquiry across school teams. This study was focused on the following research questions: 1) What strategies do school principals use to support a disciplined approach to collaborative inquiry across their schools? 2) How do they make sense of the obstacles they face? 3) How do they use the voices of their students to build teacher commitment to change?

Conceptual approach
We wanted to identify the obstacles that principals face and the strategies that they apply to overcoming these obstacles. These obstacles included teacher apprehension, lack of confidence in using evidence for decision-making, managing time, identifying and using appropriate resources.

We wanted to understand how leaders use “small data” – the voices of the learners – to develop new competencies for the young people in their buildings. And finally, we were interested in exploring the strategies they find useful, not only in overcoming barriers but also in accelerating the pace of change.

The five school principals participating in this study recently completed a post-graduate systems leadership certificate program and have some experience with the spiral of inquiry. Their schools range in size from relatively small rural elementary schools to large suburban secondary schools. They are all are part of a voluntary provincial inquiry network (a PLN) dedicated to changing outcomes for learners through cross-role teamwork.

We proposed to learn with and from them about how the concepts explored during their graduate program are informing their leadership practices in a productive way – and if so, what concepts have they found most helpful. The study used a combination of survey questions, interviews, participant journals and short videos.

Main findings and conclusions
The preliminary findings show, for example, the need for visible principal involvement and support; developing confidence through well-planned structures and rhythms; and the use of student voice and video to build teacher understanding and commitment. These findings provide insight into how principals support collaborative inquiry across school teams, how they face challenges, and build teacher commitment to change that we will further discuss in our paper and the symposium.

**Paper 3: Evaluations to support collegial learning and leading-from-the-middle**

**Issue**

In Malmö, Sweden, a professional learning network (PLN) including 81 lead teachers (extra skilled teachers with 20% development time) and four senior lecturers (50% teachers, 50% school developers) are working on creating sustainable school improvement. An important focus area for the PLN is collegial learning, which is a form of structured, focused and long-term school improvement, led by lead teachers and school leaders, in which all 800 teachers at 16 public upper secondary and adult education schools in Malmö are to be engaged in.

**Conceptual approach**

This paper discusses how investigations of collegial learning within the PLN were used, combined and presented to facilitate school improvement processes. Moreover, it was studied how school leaders and lead teachers supported these processes from the middle. Leading-from-the-middle is a relatively new concept where leadership is not top-down or bottom-up, but rather a cooperation for development amongst middle leaders or networks of education professionals (Hargreaves & Braun, 2012; Campbell, 2016).

Two investigations were conducted: an interview study on collegial learning (33 focus group interviews) and a survey amongst teachers, lead teachers and school leaders (N=543) on the role of lead teachers. The investigations were combined so that the qualitative and quantitative analyses complemented each other. The results of the combined studies concerned for instance possibilities for improving communication within the PLN and within schools. It also identified areas the PLN needs to develop and support, such as evaluations of effects on students’ learning as a result of the collegial learning.

The results were presented centrally to all schools leaders and lead teachers, but also locally in the form of discussion-meetings (one for each school) to which the school leaders and lead teachers were invited. Fullan (2010) claimed that it is important to learn about implementation during implementation, and also that it is important for implementers to learn from other implementers. The setup of the central and local presentations was made to facilitate this kind of learning.

**Main findings and conclusions**

Experiences and feedback about the local and central presentations of the investigations indicate that they were beneficial in several ways:

- It helped school leaders and lead teachers to understand the results in connection to their local collegial learning processes.
- It facilitated a discussion between lead teachers, school leaders, senior lecturers and area managers at the local department of education – a discussion that could help the leading-from-the-middle processes forward.
• It helped deepening the analysis and strengthened the ecological validity (Brewer, 2000) of the two investigations both at local school level and at central PLN level.

In retrospect, it was a good decision to take the time to interview all lead teachers and school leaders as it helped to establish a discussion within the PLN in which everyone was deeply involved and their opinions were taken seriously. The local presentations avoided that the investigations were “just another survey”, as important questions were identified for the schools to continue their work with. Also, the senior lecturers could identify focus areas important for the PLN.

**Paper 4: The role of the school leader in data teams**

**Issue**

Data use can lead to school improvement (Authors, 2016; Lai et al., 2009). Working in professional learning communities (PLCs), such as data teams, is a strategy for implementing data use in schools. Leadership is essential for the functioning of PLCs in general (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003; Katz & Earl, 2010), and data use in teams in particular (Authors, 2015). School leaders can both enable and hinder data use in teams, however (e.g., Park & Datnow, 2009; Wayman, Cho, & Spikes, 2012). To obtain more insight in leadership behaviors in data use professional development interventions, we studied the following research question: Which leadership behaviors enable the work of data teams in what way?

**Conceptual approach**

Data can be defined as information that is “systematically collected and organized to represent some aspect of schools” (Authors, 2013, p. 10). Data use can be defined as the process of “systematically analyzing existing data sources within the school, applying the outcomes of analyses in order to innovate teaching, curricula, and school performance, and implementing and evaluating these innovations” (Authors, 2010, p. 482).

PLCs consist of a group of teachers, focused on collaborative learning by sharing experiences and critical reflections. Collaboration is one of the key elements for successful professional development of teachers (e.g., Borko, 2004). Several studies also show that collaboration in teams is essential for professional development in data use (e.g., Datnow et al., 2013). This study focuses on data use in data teams: a specific type of PLC.

School leaders can enable and hinder the use of data in teams (e.g., Park & Datnow, 2009; Wayman, Cho, & Spikes, 2012). Important leadership behaviors include: setting out visions and goals for data use (Farley-Ripple & Buttram, 2014), implementing a culture of data use (Vanhof, Verhaege, Van Petegem, & Valcke, 2012), and modeling data use (Marsh, 2012). For this study in the Netherlands a longitudinal exploratory multiple case study was conducted, investigating leadership behaviors in data teams. Four data teams were followed over a period of 18 months. We studied leadership from a transformational and distributed point of view, looking at leadership behaviors of both formal and informal leaders. A total of 90 interviews were conducted and data team meetings were audio recorded. The data were analyzed in multiple rounds of within-case and across-case analyses.

**Main findings and conclusions**

The results show how leadership behaviors, such as establishing a vision, norms, and goals; providing individualized support (e.g., facilitation and emotional support) and intellectual stimulation (e.g., distributing tasks), are important for supporting data teams. Although networking is not a behavior
typically described as a transformational leadership behavior, our findings showed how the school leader can form the link between the data team and other (management) colleagues in the school, thereby spreading the data team's knowledge and creating commitment for data use in the school. Moreover, these behaviors were displayed by different people in the team, showing the importance of distributed leadership for the success of data teams.

References


