ICSEI 2018: Deepening school change for scaling: Principles, pathways and partnerships

Symposium in the Professional learning networks, relating to conference strand i): Generating Principles for Change and Scaling

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Partnerships and networks, leadership and continuous professional learning

Ideas about school autonomy and self-evaluation have evolved in recent years as policy makers around the world have wrestled with how to encourage greater flexibility and responsiveness to increasingly complex societal changes as well as improved mechanisms for knowledge exchange within and between schools. This has led to a shift towards school networks and forms of ‘network governance’, sometimes characterized in terms of ‘self-improving school systems’ (Hargreaves, 2012; Suggett, 2014), but our understanding of how these shifts impact on school and teacher quality and equity is still emerging. This session combines three presentations from three different countries, with collaborative networks, professional learning and leadership as common themes. The structure of the session moves from an overview of school to school partnerships in England, to a review of international literature on school-university partnerships that focuses on initial teacher education, to findings from studies of intra and inter-school professional learning communities in Singapore. The session will provide examples of successful and less successful networks, present principles for partnerships and outline prerequisites for partnerships and networks to succeed. It will highlight questions about the characteristics of 'learning' networks and what kinds of leadership are needed for networks and partnerships to flourish and thrive (200).

I) Lessons from a three-year study of school to school networks in England

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This paper draws on a comprehensive three-year study which aimed to understand how schools in England are responding to the government’s push for a ‘self-improving school system’ (SISS) (Greany and Higham, forthcoming). The study, which ran from 2014-17, sought to understand the extent to which ‘deep’ school to school partnerships are emerging and whether these models represent a genuine basis for school-led improvement that meets the needs of all schools. It included four detailed locality case studies (based on almost 200 interviews and 47 school case studies); a survey of almost 700 school leaders; and statistical analysis of the impact
of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). In this paper we focus on three types of network – local clusters, Teaching School Alliances (TSAs) and MATs – to ask why and how schools are forming collaborative networks, how different types of network operate and the factors that make these networks more or less successful. We compare the networks we studied to existing research and conclude that there are examples of networks in England that can be deemed both ‘effective’, in that they are impacting on the quality of teaching and learning or the breadth and depth of the curriculum in member schools, and, more or less, ‘inclusive’. However, we also describe examples where networks are either under-developed or have fallen apart due to tensions and difficulties between schools or individual leaders. We also highlight examples where network effectiveness is reliant on a degree of exclusivity, for example where a sub-group of higher-performing schools choose to work together whilst consciously excluding lower performing local schools because these are seen as less able to work together productively in the context of a demanding accountability framework. Drawing on governance theory (Bevir, 2011) we argue that while the networks we studied do demonstrate interdependencies and a sense of shared agency between schools, these networks do not appear to offer an alternative source of power that challenges the dominance of hierarchy and markets in the English system. Notwithstanding this limitation, we do see benefits accruing from many of the networks we studied and so ask ‘why do networks succeed or fail?’ We focus in particular here on the role of leaders and leadership in brokering and developing networks, since we see the agency of these local actors as one of the key differentiators between effective and ineffective networks.

II) Partnerships in teacher education – is leadership a missing link?

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The second paper draws on findings from a systematic mapping of research on partnership in teacher education (Lillejord & Børte, 2016), conducted with the intention to identify characteristics of successful partnership models. Systematic searches yielded 97 studies with potential relevance for the research question, and after quality and relevance assessment, 25 were included and analysed. Surprisingly, none of the studies provided information about successful partnerships. Instead, most of them reported problems encountered by partnership participants. In particular, tensions arising from asymmetric relations were identified. Commonly used models guiding the work in teacher education partnerships also caused problems. One example is the triad; a model assuming symmetric relationships between the student teachers, mentors from schools and university supervisors. Student teachers are expected to be enculturated into the profession through deliberation in an idealised and harmonious ‘third space’. However, researchers find that instead of learning to become a professional, student teachers learn that they are entering a profession with deep internal conflicts. Student teachers find themselves caught between, on the one hand, the research perspectives from the university lecturers and, on the other, school teachers who hold the ‘truth’ about the ‘reality’ in schools. Student teachers are not in a symmetric relationship with the two representatives from teacher education, and have to choose side. As similar problems are reported from seven countries represented in the study, these
problems appear to be predominantly structural, rather than cultural. The mapping revealed two main themes in the research on partnership in teacher education: a) relations and collaboration and b) leadership and organisation. This presentation will concentrate on the latter. Based on the analysed articles, leadership appears to be surprisingly absent in partnerships that aim to ‘bridge’ research and practice in teachers’ professional education. While researchers agree that partnerships should be strengthened, they express concern for the problems detected. For instance, Pepper et al. (2012) find that it is challenging to maintain and renew partnerships, because cross-institutional collaboration is complex and presumes competent leadership, expertise and resources that is currently lacking. Instead, work in partnerships is ‘on top of’ everything else (Petersen & Treagust, 2014). Allen et al. (2010) note that partnership members report about low self-esteem and experience isolation. School teachers feel that their job is not valued; there is a lack of support structures in schools and a weak sense of collegiality in the partnership. Breault & Breault (2010) find three themes of critical importance for partnerships to succeed: Resources, relations and renewal. This has led us to ask how leadership ought to be enacted in partnerships in teacher education – who should lead the work, and what kind of competence should be expected from the leaders?

III) Leveraging Learning Communities to Promote Professional Learning and Nurture Teacher Leadership: The Case of Singapore

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This paper draws findings from two studies on professional learning networks and examines the conditions, characteristics and quality of professional learning in Singapore schools. The networked learning community (NLC) and professional learning community (PLC) approaches are implemented at the cluster and school level respectively for different purposes throughout the Singaporean education system. While NLCs are collaborative partnerships at the cluster level that bring together educators from different schools and provide a space for purposeful and sustained developmental activities, PLCs provide collaborative learning among teachers within the same school to inquire into pedagogical practice. These learning communities provide white space for teacher to learn, to grow teacher leadership and most importantly to seek improvement in their teaching and practice. In the first study we documented two NLCs. The NLCs were guided by the Principal Advisor and Master Teacher, and juxtaposed with their own practitioner experience, teachers in these NLCs co-construct knowledge and skills in teaching and learning. In the first study we investigated two subject-based NLCs—Science (Primary) and Physics (Secondary). We compare and contrast the similarities and differences to deepen our understandings of the conditions, pedagogical content knowledge, and social characteristics of both groups. In the second study, we surveyed more than 1000 teachers across 20 primary and secondary schools and conducted focus group discussions and in-depth case studies.

In the first study, our analyses showed that despite the similar organisational structures, primary and secondary NLCs differ markedly in terms of the dynamics and relationships within the structured NLCs. The membership within the NLCs makes a difference in the dynamic of interaction. The productive dialogues at the
primary NLC are inclusive and active. The secondary NLC dialogues however require intervention from either the Master Teacher or Principal Advisor to engage silent members to participate in the discussion. Moreover, the diverse backgrounds of participants appear to have a discernible impact on the expertise afforded. Compared to the primary NLC, the secondary group appears to have a higher level of conceptual engagement and understanding in the professional discussions. The distributed expertise within the secondary NLCs allows members to generate insightful and rigorous professional conversations. We question whether the NLCs are able to function independently and sustain the momentum of learning without the guidance of Master Teachers and other experts. In the second study, we found the PLCs are rather self-contained but isolated within the school. Despite the vested interests in PLCs to generate quality professional learning experience, most PLCs use limited educational research evidence to validate their discussions and professional learning. Drawing on the theory of action and theory of change, both studies showed that promoting teacher learning via learning communities is a necessary but insufficient condition for collaborative learning to take root in Singapore schools because many educators lack the expertise to articulate and make their tacit knowledge explicit. They also have limited knowledge to anchor their discussion on educational theory and research evidence.

References


Petersen, J. E., & Treagust D. F. (2014). School and University Partnerships: The Role of Teacher Education Institutions and Primary Schools in the Development of