Exploring the role of facilitators in maximizing the benefit of professional learning networking

Context: Professional Learning Networks

There is an international focus on school improvement and school autonomy to better prepare children for the educational demands of the 21st century (Schleicher, 2012). Future employees must be capable of constantly adapting, learning, growing and collaborating (Pellegrino, 2012; Binkley et al, 2012), and positioning themselves in a fast-changing world. Preparing current students for this future, requires teachers to become 'high-level knowledge workers who constantly advance their own professional knowledge as well as that of their profession' (Schleicher, 2012, p.11).

In this context, high quality, continuing professional learning and development is necessary to ensure that all teachers are able to meet the demands of diverse student populations (Kools & Stoll, 2016; Schleicher, 2012). What's more, teachers learning both from their peers and from others (such as university researchers) is considered an effective way to support practitioners in rethinking their own practice and improving their teaching (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008). This suggests 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 and others in networks (Finnigan, Daly, Hylton & Che, 2015). Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) of teachers 'committed to and capable of creating deep and broad teaching and learning' (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009, p.107) thus represents a promising approach to achieving continuous school improvement (Sahlberg, 2011).

For the purpose of this bid, Professional Learning Networks (PLNs) are defined as any group who engage in collaborative learning with others outside of their everyday community of practice in order to improve teaching and learning (Brown and Poortman, 2017; Wenger, 1998). The ultimate aim of any PLN is to improve outcomes for both educators and students. Given this definition, PLNs are seen to encompass a huge range of (within and across-school) network types, including professional development networks, research or data use teams, multi-site lesson study teams, teacher design teams, and teacher education networks (Brown and Poortman, forthcoming). At the same time, research reveals only mixed or small results in terms of the impact of networks on teacher and student outcomes (Lomos, Hoffman & Bosker, 2011; Chapman & Muijs, 2014; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008); suggesting that PLNs do not automatically lead to sustainable school and system improvement.

Research so far has shown that a number of supporting conditions need to be in place before PLNs can be successful (Stoll et al, 2006; Katz & Earl, 2010; Lomos et al., 2011; Vescio et al., 2008). In particular is the vital role of leadership, both of learning networks themselves, which can be formal or informal; but also the role of school leaders (and the leaders of other stakeholder groups) in ensuring that engagement in network activity by teaching staff is supported. Of these the former is currently under-researched and, as such, will be the focus

of this research project. Specifically, we will examine the role of PLN leaders (referred to here as network facilitators) in supporting two PLNs, one based in Austria and one based in England. We are selecting these two educational contexts as they represent two distinct points along the autonomy and improvement journey: in England PLNs have been commonly used as a means to facilitate school improvement since 2010 when government policy shifted towards collaboration and school 'self-improvement' (i.e. schools working together to improve educational outcomes). In Austria, a new reform is upcoming that will require schools to collaborate in clusters to facilitate improved teaching and student outcomes in relation to specific needs. Improved school leadership also forms a key focus of these clusters.

Both PLNs have the aim of helping teachers develop new approaches to teaching and learning, through engaging with the expertise and knowledge of other participants, as well as external knowledge such as research.

Research approach
The questions to be addressed by this research project are:
1) What role do network facilitators play in maximizing the impact of Professional Learning Networks (i.e. how do they help teachers develop new approaches to teaching and learning, through engaging with the expertise and knowledge of other participants, as well as external knowledge such as research)?
2) How might this situation be improved?
3) What lessons can be learned by other network facilitators to maximise the impact of their networks?

To address the research questions above, we will develop case studies of our two PLNs, using the following methods:
1) A literature review to ascertain the types of support are required by and from network facilitators if PLNs are to achieve impact
2) In-depth semi-structured interviews with participants of each PLN to ascertain the support they felt they received in order to develop new approaches to teaching and learning through engaging with the PLN.
3) In-depth semi-structured interviews with the network facilitators from each PLN to ascertain the support they felt they received in order to develop new approaches to teaching and learning through engaging with the PLN.

Interview data were recorded and transcribed. Data from the recordings were analysed thematically, with coding undertaken abductively to in relation to each research question: in other words, a coding structure will be developed from the literature review, but this will be augmented by what materialises from the interviews. As well as analysing data thematically a gap analysis will assess key differences between the two sets of respondents in terms of perceived and actual support.