

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORKS:

A CASE STUDY ABOUT THE ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADERS IN MAXIMIZING THEIR IMPACT

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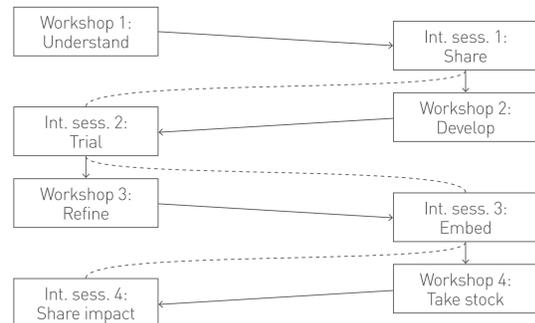
OUR RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions explored by the study are as follows:

1. What leadership actions did school leaders envisage would be required to maximise the impact of the New Forest RLN for their schools?
2. How were these actions realised in practice?
3. How effective were these actions perceived to be?
4. What improvements could be made moving forward?

EXCELLENCE TOGETHER TEACHING SCHOOL ALLIANCE

Research Learning Networks (RLNs) are a specific type of PLN designed to enable the roll out of new research-informed teaching practice at scale (Brown, 2017). RLNs operate by establishing one (or more) PLNs with participants from a number of schools, then using these participants to generate research-informed practices as part of a series of network workshops. Participants then work with their wider school colleagues to embed these practices in their 'home' schools.



The specific RLN that forms the focus of this case study comprises 21 staff from eight primary schools situated in the New Forest area of England. It is hoped that the New Forest RLN will ultimately lead to change amongst some 70 teachers and 1,470 students overall. This study focuses on the operation of the New Forest RLN from October 2017 to June 2018.

OUR APPROACH

A case study approach was employed, comprising:

1. In-depth semi-structured interviews were held with the 12 senior leader participants of the New Forest RLN after the first RLN workshop in October 2017
2. In-depth semi-structured interviews were held with the 12 senior leader participants of the New Forest RLN after the Last RLN workshop in June 2018
3. In-depth semi-structured interviews were held with the 9 Opinion Former participants of the New Forest RLN in June 2018
4. The analysis of impact data and policy-documents

SUPPORTING CONDITIONS FOR PLNS

Hubers and Poortman (2018) suggest that a number of supporting conditions need to be in place before PLNs can be successful [also see Stoll et al, 2006; Katz and Earl, 2010; Lomos et al., 2011; Vescio et al., 2008].

These conditions include

- focus,
- collaboration,
- individual/group learning and
- reflective professional inquiry.

In particular, however is the vital role of leadership (e.g., see Harris and Jones, 2010; Muijs and Harris, 2003).

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

In the first instance, leadership is required of the networks themselves to ensure that they function effectively (Briscoe et al., 2015).

Second however, is the role of senior leaders in ensure that there is meaningful participation by their teachers in network activity and that this participation makes a difference within teachers' 'home' schools. Here leaders must establish a two-way link between the work of the PLN and the day to day teaching practice taking place within schools.

This link comprises two aspects:

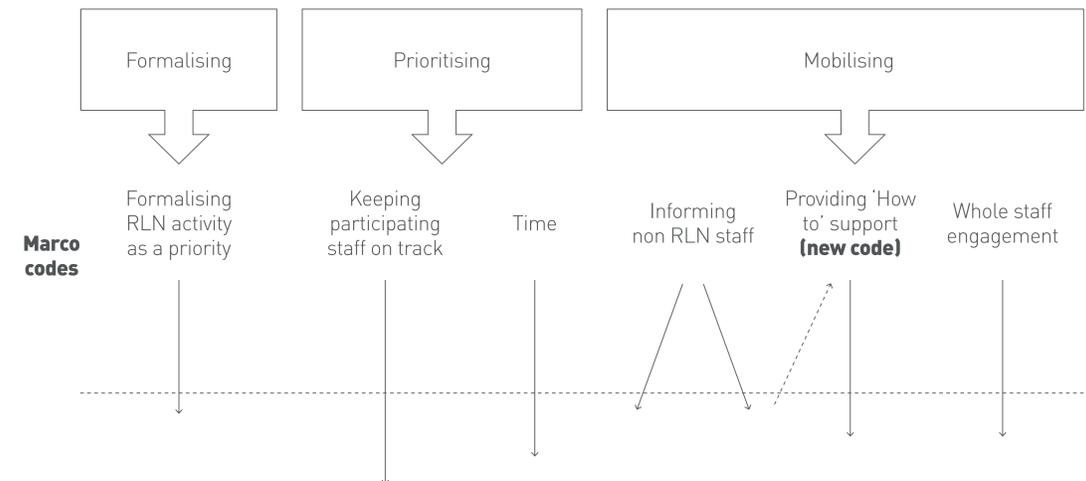
1. To maximise the benefits of being part of a learning network, PLN participants need to engage effectively in networked learning activity.
2. Teachers (and other relevant staff) within the wider community of practice need to know about, engage with, apply and continue to improve the products and outputs of the PLN; ultimately with the aim of improving student outcomes.

To achieve such a link, however, requires senior leaders to understand how to meaningfully support both participation within PLNs and the mobilisation of PLN practice by teachers within their school.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

1. Key is that school leaders understand the need to ensure that having schools participate in PLN activity will only be effective if such participation is given relatively high status compared to other initiatives, as well as being appropriately prioritised in terms of resource allocation. This can be achieved through including PLN activity on the School Improvement Plan and by ensuring adequate meeting and PPA time is allocated to enable participants to undertake PLN activity while back at school.
2. Mobilisation on the other hand appears to be a relatively new idea for school leaders, possibly accounting for the myriad of ways in which it was approached

CODING STRUCTURE FROM THE SECOND SET OF INTERVIEWS



MOBILISATION IS COMPLEX!

