

Networking as System Policy
Balancing Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions

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INTRODUCTION

Networks play a significant role in the contemporary economy and society. Both business and public administration increasingly see partnership arrangements, strategic alliances and cross-organisation relationships as essential for smart and rapid innovation at a time when the traditional efficiency and productivity levers alone are no longer sufficient for success. In public administration experts talk about new solutions to challenging problems needing lateral co-operation, co-creation, co-production and ‘learning as we go’ characteristics.

This paper explores school networks as a powerful change mechanism. The development of school networks in Victoria Australia from mandatory participation in a regionally led network structure for school improvement to more autonomous and self-managing networks provides a practical example of networks in action and shows the variations in purpose and impact between ‘vertical’ management and ‘horizontal’ engagement. The gains from the more lateral network structure with its greater freedom for diverse collaborations and more flexible governance can be powerful mutual learning and peer accountability, both of which make a major contribution to system strengthening. But self-generated networks also require hard and purposeful work and the pattern of engagement can be uneven. A challenge for systems is deciding the ‘right’ level of support and incentives to stimulate the collaborations that make a difference and contribute to improvement.

Significant value-add of networks

The rationale for establishing school networks, particularly in environments where there is a high degree of school autonomy, is familiar to those engaged in education reform. There are benefits from more bottom-up, and localised decision making; shared enquiry and innovation among like-minded partners; better use of scarce resources; customisation of programs; and importantly, an overall sense of collective efficacy and shared improvement in teaching and learning (Hargreaves 2010). In many jurisdictions networks, often managed and funded through regional or central authorities, have been part of the landscape for at least two decades and they continue to evolve along with changing education system design.

In other areas of government networks are similarly seen as pivotal to successful rapid reform and securing key breakthroughs; ‘they have proliferated to an astonishing extent within different countries, policy areas and levels of governance’ is one assessment (Sorensen and Torfing 2009:235). They are particularly valued for their capacity to bring diverse perspectives to the table, whether from inside or outside government, enable better analysis of problems and more freedom to co-ordinate and implement effectively. Effective networks can cut through complex hierarchies and generate new solutions to intractable and often challenging local problems whether in preventative health, welfare issues such as social housing and support for vulnerable youth, energy solutions, the environment, or in restructuring regional economies (Bourgon 2011). Complex issues put a premium on the capacity of leaders and organisations to take account of a multitude of interdependencies and work across traditional boundaries. Well-functioning collaborative networks add high value and can enable the whole to become more than the sum of its parts.

In business networks and partnerships are now routinely part of sectors such as biotechnology, information technology, advanced manufacturing and others where strategic co-operation and alliances rather than competition are the drivers of rapid innovation, productivity and growth. Technology enables traditional boundaries to be rethought to support a new ‘architecture of relationships’ and enables the rapid

exchange of ideas and ‘accelerated learning’ that drives innovation among enterprises (Hagel and Seeley Brown 2013:9).

So the anticipated benefits from networks are significant: they facilitate a clearer strategy for solving complex and cross cutting problems, especially as they impact locally; they generate innovative and proactive solutions; they enable high degrees of legitimacy and relevance for actions by those who best understand the problems and context; they enable resource sharing and efficiencies; they facilitate continuous collaborative learning; and they built mutual trust and interdependency that lays the foundation for future collaboration.

Challenges and costs

While advocacy for networks is pervasive, the practical reality is that many in business and in the public sector are still in the dark in knowing how to generate and manage complex collaborative processes across organisational boundaries so that outcomes are consistently positive. Networks often come at a cost such as the significant amount of time needed for relationship building; the personal ‘energy’ and additional resources needed to sustain high quality deliberative decision making; and loss of knowledge when a significant leader departs. There are also many design complexities that end up as management dilemmas such as achieving the ideal balance in accountabilities between networks that are ‘loose’ – in that they have the freedom to define a problem and innovate to solve it – but also ‘tight’ in that definitive outputs or actions are needed (Alford and O’Flynn 2012). And central to the design of networks in any sector is the question of the balance between the more pragmatic central-local ‘vertical’ accountability and a more indistinct ‘lateral’ or horizontal engagement along with associated tensions with the more traditional administrative bodies and the layers of system governance.

International research findings from the school sector also moderate our expectations of the benefits of networks. Research suggests that networks are more complex and problematic than we think; collaboration is necessary but not sufficient for success; and that the effectiveness of networks is dependent on a finely tuned inter-connected systems approach to organisational change (Earl et al 2006). These are demanding requirements but it is arguable that collaboration and networking are so intrinsic to contemporary organisations and governance that the question is now more about how to improve rather than whether to continue with networks.

Looking behind the rhetoric, what do we know about the outcomes from education networks; will they assume the more elevated boundary-crossing roles aspired to in other sectors; and what would make them central to improvement or what might consign them to the periphery of reform efforts?

NETWORKS: ARE THEY WORKING WELL AND IMPROVING SCHOOLS?

The discussion that follows draws on observations in Victoria Australia as networks continue to change purpose and form (Suggett 2013, 2014).

The nature of school networks has changed from being driven and resourced as a state wide network plan, with a strong centre-region-local management structure or vertical dimension, to self-generating, autonomous and multi-focussed networks of schools. Important questions that need to be addressed are whether these free-forming and purpose-built lateral networks are of greater or less benefit to improving

schools and to boosting the system quality than the more structured and directed networks; and will they result in schools behaving more like other sectors where networks are valued for liberating thinking to bring fresh perspectives to solve old and new problems?

The sections below consider how school networks feature as system policy; the changes to lateral and school generated networks in Victoria, Australia – why and what has changed; and the possible future of lateral networks within the larger formal system.

Interest based networks for individuals or organisational networks

Often the same terms are used to refer to different sets of practices. Greater clarity about network types and purposes might open the door to a better understanding of the range of benefits to be expected from certain practices and an understanding of how risks might be significant to one type of network but irrelevant to another.

There are two distinct intellectual histories underpinning networks and they provide insight into a key difference in the orientation and composition of networks (Considine 2001).

Firstly, policy studies build on belief in the value of *personal* collaboration between officials and interest groups in the wider public service and how they influence decisions. We can apply this idea of individuals comprising networks to collaboration among educational professionals with common interests, or between education professionals and those in community organisations or business that have a common interest or common goal. This is part of the larger tradition of valuing personal relationship building, exercising likes and dislikes and professional exchange among individuals and their interests – like the compliment ‘she’s good at networking’.

A second tradition is from organisational studies where collaborations are built around *organisations’* programs and functions rather than individuals’ interests. These networks imply a deeper and more stable field for relationships and negotiations than is evident in the more flexible, voluntary, individual and interest based associations. In organisational driven networks terms like ‘strategic partnerships’ and joined-up or collaborative governance and tailored services are common concepts along with co-production or co-design. Organisational networks use interdependence as a binding characteristic and depend on organisational flexibility to get things done more quickly. They might refer to networks within a sector or cross-sector.

The two types of networks are obviously on a spectrum, but it is a useful distinction to make when considering the configuration of school networks. Social network analysis applied to learning in school networks points to the critical need to understand how individuals form social networks that control communication and knowledge transfer (Daly and Finnigan 2010). On the other hand, a major strand of school reform literature emphasises the imperative for whole-school engagement in learning from each other and across organisations, the critical role of school leadership and the need for a reform commitment to reach into all classrooms (e.g. City et al 2009).

Do you need both types of networks to flourish for sustained improvement?

Challenging evaluation findings for Victorian Government school networks

In 2008, the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development formalised whole-school ‘organisational’ based networks as a major structure in the education system. These networks were to be the driving force for system wide school transformation but a subsequent evaluation found their impact was variable with no observable impact on student attainment and uneven influence on principal and school core beliefs and behaviour.

Schools were geographically structured into 70 regional networks with around 20 schools in each so as to better target and resource school improvement efforts. Leaders or change agents were appointed for each network. Most schools had been in geographic based networks for around a decade, based on a mix of teacher interests and principal collegiality but involvement was more at the voluntary end of the spectrum.

At the time, the initiative was distinguished from network based structures in other education jurisdictions, such as England's Networked Learning Communities or networks in New Zealand that fostered professional learning to support understanding of a new national curriculum. The Victorian approach emphasised networks as the new middle or meso level for strategic planning, deployment of local resources, professional learning and accountability. The intention was that networks would support whole-school and whole-system improvement. This was essentially a hub-and-spoke de-centralised model with increased decision making and accountability at the network level. It was very significant change.

The theory of action was that local level leadership in clusters of approximately 20 schools within a geographic area would:

- locate accountability for improvement where it matters at the regional and network level;
- allow nominated network leaders to collectively build deep knowledge of the needs of schools within their clusters so as to support their improvement agenda;
- ensure that local allocation of resourcing and provision decisions was a good match to the collective interests of the community served by each network of schools; and
- provide sufficient resources dedicated to school improvement to lead to improvement in the performance of all schools within the Victorian government system.

The University of Melbourne's two phase longitudinal evaluation of the regionally based networks of schools showed only mixed success (Griffin et al 2012).

There was strong support for network participation and objectives among principals, although there was a large variation in the extent of principals' actual participation in the networks. School size was influential in the capacity of a school to take the extra time needed for a major role in network functions.

There was strong support for the teaching and learning functions of networks, mostly enacted through intensive networked based professional learning, and a majority of principals reported that network participation had improved teaching and learning at their school. The networks also had a strong impact on leadership team involvement and development.

There was, however, no evidence of a network based impact on state-wide student outcomes beyond that expected from the learning growth that occurs as students mature. While the majority of principals expressed strong support for networks and their capacity to improve teaching and learning, no network impact on student learning outcomes was observed.

Looking more closely at the networks' actual collaborative activities provides some explanation of this. The study identified that exchange within networks was largely restricted to ideas, concepts and best practice dissemination. Human and physical resource sharing were not strongly supported by principals. Further, principals' views on desired functions of networks were constrained by those aspects of network support and activity currently provided by their regions and Principals were not asked to propose other potential areas of network support. This might have presented as a responsive and organic change strategy but the evaluation found that the leadership for change was coming largely from 'the outside' rather than

from the 'inside' where schools would be expected to be the most active agents of enquiry and change. The finding that collaboration was more about ideas exchange than exploring tangible practices shows a significant limitation in how they functioned and possibly how they were led.

So, even though this was a large, well-resourced network strategy with ambitious goals, international expertise, a credible theory of action, and designed with belief in the power of local collaborative learning, its state-wide impact was disappointing. It would appear the efforts to stimulate deep lateral collaboration and shared decision-making on issues that matter in a locality did not convert to significantly changed behaviour and practices in individual schools and improved outcomes for children and young people.

However, two other studies of networks within regions in Victoria where strong leadership for change was provided by the region, revealed more positive outcomes (although they did not employ an equivalent quantitative methodology). The two regions, comprising around 20 per cent of the states' schools and each with around seven networks, did show consistent and region-wide improvement in student outcomes during this period (but off a low base) and secured very high principal and teacher engagement (Hopkins et al 2011; Suggett 2013). Schools in these networks committed to a common staged reform agenda, designed and sequenced by the region with an objective of building self-managing networks. Regional and network leadership effectively built capability for lateral or horizontal professional engagement among schools as part of professional learning for enhancing classroom teaching and whole-school improvement. Their focus on transforming practices was intentionally at the collective level and encouraged intense and detailed cross-school and peer-to-peer interaction.

Their success does raise the issue not only of the need to build effective school leadership but also regional and network leadership, especially their capability to equip school leaders with the belief in and skills for collaborative action.

Networked Learning Communities Programme, England: equivocal impact

The Victorian experience has parallels with an informative three phase study of networks in England (Erle et al 2006) and subsequent reflections for New Zealand on the nature of effective networks (Timperley and Erle 2012). The research is very helpful in understanding the outcomes of the state-wide Victorian experience where principals and teachers placed high value on the process of sharing and learning in networks but where the networks failed to impact on aggregate student outcomes.

In reference to those regional networks in Victoria where progress was made in student outcomes, the evaluation is similarly helpful in showing the importance of intense, evidence-based and well-structured joint work as the core of successful networked activity.

The extensive analysis of the English school networks confirmed the complexity of the way networked learning communities function and how they relate to their primary goal of improving student outcomes. While identifying some 'fairly erratic' associations with actual improvement in learners' achievements, the conclusion was that networks can change educators' thinking and beliefs about learning and their teaching practices and that these are possibly the leading potential enablers of improvement in schools.

But, while networks can create the conditions for influencing teachers' thinking and practices, actual change at the level of the school and classroom is not guaranteed. Strong engagement in the network and consistent involvement in what it offers in professional learning and knowledge creation are vital for this to occur. While collaboration and relationship building are important factors it is the tangible joint work that challenges and changes thinking and practice.

On the other hand, schools that did not deeply engage with the networks did not see the network as influential on the focus and practices of their school and saw the potential for influence more on student engagement and motivation than improvement in attainment.

Both the Victorian and the English research into networks have cautionary lessons. Exposure to networks alone does not do the hard work of school improvement or transformation – even when they are well-resourced. Collaboration and relationship building open the door to an agenda for change and professional learning but it appears it is at the whole school organisational level where engagement and collaboration needs to gain traction to impact on school improvement. Also, just as good leadership in schools is necessary for improvement, good leadership at the administrative level (in Victoria's case at a regional and network level) is also crucial for improvement.

TRANSITION TO LATERAL NETWORKS

In Victoria, with as many principals and their schools unenthusiastic about the regional network structure as there were ardent supporters and a change to a conservative government, the regionally led network strategy was dissolved so as to open the way for locally generated network options.

What has changed?

Firstly, networks ceased to be a 'reform initiative' as such and instead have been merged into the system's structural features. This is an important shift. In the 2010 Ministerial statement *Towards Victoria as a Learning Community* (DEECD 2012), freely formed collaborative networks are explicitly placed alongside 'enhanced autonomy', 'professional trust' and 'accountability' as the levers of improvement. The change is not only to shift decision making further to the local level but also to build the local level's collective capacity for implementing change.

Schools are expected to make locally informed decisions about why they would seek a network option to solve a problem, with whom they network, when and for how long. This is an attempt to normalise engagement in whole-school networks and open exchange among individuals in the day-to-day functions of contemporary schools.

The performance accountability system also changed to incorporate 'peer reviews' and schools and the administration agreed to a 'Compact' that outlines system and school roles and responsibilities – all in the spirit of heightened local (and lateral) responsibility for improvement.

The second difference from the past is that while some highly enterprising, diverse and energetic networks have emerged, overall there are fewer schools across the state forming and interacting in networks among schools and others organisations. They have not yet adapted from being led or invited into networks to finding their own momentum for joint problem solving and collaboration. Principals and teachers lament the lack of leaders willing and capable of putting in the time collaboration needs; the difficulty of identifying a significant and common purpose and finding like-minded people to work with; and competing resource priorities. Some have reverted to a minimal form of social networking.

By contrast, those who have taken the leap into forming highly effective networks see no limitations and activity is described in the same dynamic way as highly focused and innovative networked businesses or community organisations.

Some flourishing networks

The characteristics of the networks that have formed are similar to the notion of ‘self-improving systems of schools’(Hargreaves 2010) where schools as a collective entity assume much of the responsibility for school improvement rather than that being the responsibility of regional or central office or individual schools acting alone (Suggett 2014).

The drive for change comes from within organisations and through individuals and they are testing their ideas, their growth and improvement against others of their choice. They are interacting very widely with experts, other education sectors, community groups, and business but keeping the focus on teaching and learning and the needs of learners.

As one principal of a large successful school said,

We have a new network with a common purpose – it started with a sense of ‘we could do better’ in terms of our performance so let’s work out how to do this together rather than see each other as competitors or concerned with different issues.

Another leader of a newly formed cross-state network said,

We are about significant improvement without red-tape; I don’t want the constraints of the structured approaches the department has traditionally run. The only focus of this group of schools is their core business of teaching and learning and we will join with those of our choice and make our own path to change.

Or,

Setting up and engaging in networks is now how this school works; they are central to how we improve; our doors are open and we want to work with others who are also transparent; networks start up where they are needed and last for as long as necessary... I belong to five.’

Some of the key features of these new school generated networks are the following.

- The networks are *highly visible* and relevant in the strategies of individual schools; it is not just a few teachers and the principals that value the engagement but networking is valued as a whole-school strategy.
 - For example, a commitment among ten schools to conduct regular ‘instructional rounds’ with peer observation, feedback and progress reports is central to the schools’ strategic plans for capacity building
- The networks purposefully establish a *collective authority* for a local solutions approach and their activities are built around co-construction of solutions. Particularly in regional locations, other local organisations are also very active with schools in school improvement and in local collaborative work.
 - For example a whole of provincial city commitment to literacy improvement; and tailored local training and employment solutions.

- They are potentially part of what is valued as a *self-improving system and system leadership* with evidence of very specific mutual support being offered, particularly among larger well-resourced schools and those that are smaller and struggling; and along with this a sense of mutual accountability that comes from a new transparency.
 - For example one new network has decided to focus on a two year intensive and collaborative numeracy improvement strategy among twelve schools of varying capability and performance.
- New ‘system leaders’ have emerged and their qualities are distinctive. Overwhelmingly they are facilitative, operating without conventional vertically conferred authority; they feel responsible for collective success, and develop the special skills to achieve this.
 - One leader said ‘it takes me a day a week to do this; it’s all about getting buy-in to what count; my school gets immense benefit so no one resents the time it takes.’

With the ‘formal’ education administrative system narrowing its focus to exercising the key levers that deliver performance outcomes, the systemic role of the ‘front-line’ of schools and their communities is elevated and strengthened around a culture of shared responsibility and mutual accountability. What a system is and what it is valued for is changing.

System leadership: from vertical to horizontal

The OECD: CERI *Innovative Learning Environments* (ILE) project has identified many systems and groups of schools where there is a sense of urgency and momentum to cross conventional institutional boundaries so as to innovate and improve outcomes. The benefits of a vibrant and responsive ‘meso-level’ or local or regional organising layer are that schools do not have to work in isolation but are connected to diverse communities of practice focussed on improving learning (Istance 2011).

New Zealand’s *Learning and Change Network Strategy*¹ and British Columbia’s *Networks of Enquiry and Innovation*² are two similar examples of successful ‘lateral’ network-based school improvement strategies. These school-to-school collaborations are voluntary, anchored in school-university partnerships, have support from central authorities but are not directed by them and most importantly have developed a rigorous and customised improvement methodology for collective professional learning that embodies re-shaping of beliefs and practices.

These networks are very far from being another layer of bureaucracy. Networks of choice for schools are based on the aspiration that a school that is collaboratively networked with other schools and with other organisations can achieve more than a school operating alone. They can jointly generate a self-improving ethos and agenda.

Networks of the past in Victoria were delegated authority in the traditional de-centralised hub-and-spoke model where big decisions are made centrally and de-centralised units are responsible for refinement and implementation. Networks were funded separately, led by externally appointed experts in capacity building and school improvement, generated their own improvement strategies within a common theory of action. Some succeeded but many failed to mobilise the core energy that a contemporary collaboration can bring – perhaps witnessed by their rapid decline when external ‘vertical’ leadership was withdrawn.

¹ <http://www.education.auckland.ac.nz/en/about/learning-and-change-networks.html>

² <http://noii.ca/>

The new networks are harder to describe – they display wide flexibility and variability; they are not organisations as such but serve as a platform for co-operation. The table below is a simple representation of the changed landscape described by principals.

Changed landscape for networks	
From...	To...
‘Hub and spoke’ organisational networks	Flexible and changing mix of personal and organisational networks
All expected to belong	Variable participation; fit for purpose
Led by (external) experts in capacity building	Internally led design – hire who they want to support priorities
Participation often seen as an end in itself	Only formed for a specific purpose tied to schools’ strategies
School and regional accountability in modified vertical structure	Soft mutual accountability in networks emerging; peer review built into formal accountability
Networks of schools as the focus	Networks locally formed across sectors as needed

But they are still in transition and engagement is far from universal. School leaders continue to express their on-going reservations about the costs and benefits of locally generated and self-managed networks.

- Is it in my job description?
- What is the accountability for the actions of networks?
- What do we do about those who do not want to engage?
- What if I become dependent on a network that falls apart?
- How can we resource all this extra activity?
- When is someone going to tell me what the future is for networks?

One is left considering if the momentum for change and freedom to innovate is welcome or do we need to do more to open up opportunities for those who are reluctant; or is this just too demanding for an average school?

A question that arises in Victoria and applies elsewhere, is whether schools could move into a more ‘autonomous’ model of laterally driven networks without prior engagement in more structured and centrally or regionally led reform programs; is there a developmental pathway? Because of their previous experience and capacity some networks are now flourishing and are looking at more innovative options than otherwise whereas others are floundering. Perhaps a ‘mixed’ model is needed to help steer those schools in networks that are unproductive into new affiliations.

Advice about networks that impact on the core functions of an organisation rather than only at the periphery is that they are high risk, but have high gains if done well. Success depends on deep

understanding about building 'social capital', taking a step by step assessment of gains but leaving space for flexibility and innovative solutions.

Benefits and risks come from the same elements – the differences among parties. Whereas differences in levels of knowledge and capabilities can be problematic and take time to be managed; variation in the types of knowledge are where the value can be gained from networked or collaborative modes of working. A wide range of capabilities and the opportunity for dialogue holds out the prospect that the solutions can be 'more than the sum of the parts'.

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