

Commentary: professional learning networks: insights and future questions

I am delighted to have the opportunity to comment on the articles in this thoughtfully curated special issue on professional learning networks (PLNs) and knowledge mobilization co-guest edited by Cindy Poortman and Chris Brown. The articles represent rigorous scholarship by esteemed scholars from across the globe and contribute knowledge that helps to shape thinking on a number of key issues. In this commentary, I draw on the articles to discuss how PLNs are defined and characterized, what it takes to mobilize knowledge within a PLN and how context plays a role within PLNs. These are some of the many areas in which the articles in this special issue provide significant new insights. Next, I use the articles as a launching point to examine some areas that are ripe for further study, as well as some questions for consideration.

What are PLNs, how do they mobilize knowledge and how does the context matter?

The articles are remarkably consistent in their use of key terms, which is helpful. Most of the articles use the following definition for professional learning networks (PLNs): groups who collaborate “outside of their community of practice” to improve teaching and learning (Brown, 2020, p. 14). Because PLNs bring together people across settings and sometimes also role groups, they have the potential for spreading varied knowledge (MacGregor, 2021). Knowledge mobilization is defined as “creating, sharing, and applying knowledge from collaborative learning in PLNs” (Poortman and Brown, 2021, p.).

Next, the distinction between PLNs and professional learning communities (PLCs) is a critical one. A group of teachers who collaborate within the same school would not likely be considered a PLN; more likely, this group would be referred to as a PLC. PLNs are not necessarily place-based and can operate virtually or in face-to-face formats (Tulowitzki, 2021). The fact that PLNs are not geographically bound is a distinctive feature. PLCs are more likely to exist *within* a community of practice such as school, rather than across communities of practice (Rodway *et al.*, 2021). However, the goals of PLNs and PLCs are quite similar, including promoting collective and individual learning through a process of inquiry (Rodway *et al.*, 2021; Tulowitzki, 2021). The use of evidence as part of the inquiry process is often a feature as well (Tulowitzki, 2021). In some cases, PLCs and PLNs can coexist, as in Schnellert and Butler’s (2021) study.

Across the globe, policymakers and system leaders have invested a great deal of energy and resources in the development of PLNs in education. Such networks offer great promise for sharing knowledge and promoting collaboration both across schools. However, they often fall short of meeting their intended goals. A variety of factors influence the success of network, including how school leaders can mobilize the knowledge evolving from PLNs in order to improve teaching and learning. This issue is significant, as we have many examples of successful practice in education, but transferring those successes to a larger number of schools has proved to be a vexing endeavor.

Numerous articles in this issue provide concrete and varied examples of PLNs and the ways in which they contributed to knowledge mobilization. For example, the PLN described in Tulowitzki (2021) is an online master’s program involving students from multiple countries. This is distinctive from other PLNs which are typically comprised of teachers



within a school system at the district, state or national level. [Rodway et al. \(2021\)](#) studied a PLN focused on improving math instruction across a set of feeder schools in one district. [Mason and Galloway's \(2021\)](#) describe a program involving teachers across several schools in one country, who engaged in a PLN as part of a project to improve literacy outcomes. [Schnellert and Butler's \(2021\)](#) examine teachers who worked with co-teaching partners within their schools and also as part of a broader cross-school PLN.

Several articles examine what it takes to mobilize knowledge in PLNs and who is best suited for this task. The articles offer some important answers to these questions. [Mason and Galloway's \(2021\)](#) article provides an interesting take, as the professional learning network they studied in Sierra Leone involved teachers without any formal teacher certification. However, the teachers had deep local knowledge of students and the school system and thus were well positioned for knowledge mobilization. Teachers in [Rodway et al's \(2021\)](#) study also served as key knowledge brokers in the network they studied. These authors further note that those in formal organizational roles that would appear to lend themselves to knowledge brokering, those individuals were not the most effective. This article helpfully defines *knowledge* in the context of their study as “advice, materials, new ideas, and differentiation strategies” (p.). In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that teachers would be an important source of knowledge on instructional differentiation, as opposed to others in the network who are farther from the classroom.

[Jesacher-Roessler's \(2021\)](#) article in this issue also tackles the question of how knowledge mobilization occurs, investigating knowledge mobilization both on an individual level and an organizational level. This article provides a detailed examination of the literature on participants in PLNs who function as knowledge mobilizers and also presents a conceptual framework for exploring institutional change that results from knowledge mobilization. In this study, the Austrian cross-grade, cross-school network of teachers did not see themselves as knowledge mobilizers and thus, did not act intentionally to mobilize knowledge within their schools. The author concludes that they needed to be strengthened in their roles. In a case of a more successful PLN, [Schnellert and Butler \(2021\)](#) explain that knowledge mobilization is also enhanced by a shared focus and sense of accountability, sustained cycles of inquiry, valuing diversity and using experts as resources, among other factors.

Several articles in this issue remind us of the varied and contextually situated nature of PLNs and their outcomes. Policy environments shape the work of PLNs in meaningful ways ([Brown and Poortman, 2021](#)). [Schnellert and Butler \(2021\)](#) foreground the importance of adapting the work of PLNs to suit local work contexts, which in their case was a school district in Canada's Southern Arctic. The authors explain that when the work within PLNs “was complemented by *in situ* opportunities to extend collaboration, professional learning and practice development appeared to be further deepened” ([Schnellert and Butler, 2021](#)). [Mason and Galloway's \(2021\)](#) study documented how a PLN in Sierra Leone that focused on improving students' literacy outcomes yielded other shifts as well, an additional outcome related to the decrease in the use of corporal punishment in schools. As the authors noted, a student in their study reported that “Teachers were really beating us for anything but that has stopped. They have paper canes now, as pointers, not to beat us with.” ([Mason and Galloway, 2021](#), p.). While this kind of outcome is rarely examined in studies of PLNs, it was important in this national context. Overall, the strength of this special issue is the fact that the articles inform about PLNs with different configurations and in such a wide variety of settings.

What are new lines of intersection and inquiry with respect to PLNs?

The articles in this special issue are generative in providing inspiration for several lines of thought and future inquiry. First, there is the potential for further study of an understudied

type of PLN. Second, it is important to study the informal networks that arise within PLNs. The degree to which PLNs advance social justice goals is also worthy of further investigation, as are the emotional dimensions of PLNs. Finally, there are important questions regarding the study of PLNs and how to measure PLN “success.” Each of these topics is discussed in more detail below.

Many PLNs exist across or within school systems. There are others that intentionally bring together educators across role groups in structured learning experiences. The PLN in [Tulowitzki’s \(2021\)](#) study is a master’s program. To what degree do other cohort-based degree programs in education fit the characterization of a PLN? My own university, UCSD, offers an Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership (in collaboration with CSU San Marcos) in which a cohort of education professionals move through a program together for three intense years, engaging in collaborative and individual learning, guided by evidence and inquiry and a shared mission to support equity, justice and inclusion. The goal is to build a community of leaders. An expressed purpose of the program is to “address the common objective of enhancing and providing the best conditions for student learning” ([UCSD Department of Education Studies, 2020](#), para 1) as well as to learn about organizational change and development in a diverse society. The coursework provides continual opportunities for students to interrogate problems of practice in educational settings. Though not designed as a PLN, it seems it is one. There are many other cohort-based degree programs for practicing educators that could fit the PLN characterization as well. Studying such programs would be a fruitful way to learn more about this kind of PLN and its contribution to knowledge mobilization.

On a related note, it would be useful to examine the *informal* networks that arise within PLNs. For example, a group of six women in the education doctorate program described above formed a professional learning community within the broader PLN provided by the program itself. In an article about their experience, [Abukar et al. \(2018\)](#) explain that “doctoral students who organize themselves into a support group implement an important strategy that supports the Ed.D. as an applied practitioner program” (p. 222). The students organized themselves into a weekly writing group that was initially intended to provide support through the dissertation process but extended more broadly: “Within this community, we validated each other’s personal challenges such as family and health, and equally important, we discussed issues of social justice as they played out in our professional settings of elementary, middle school, and higher education” ([Abukar et al., 2018](#), p. 215). As [Rodway et al. \(2021\)](#) aptly note, “people do not function in singular networks; we are constantly operating across multiple networks at any given time” (p.).

Another area that is ripe for further study is the social justice dimension of PLN work. Indeed some PLNs are guided by the expressed purpose of promoting equity or by other more clearly critical goals such as advancing racial equity or social inclusion. It would be useful to document how PLNs engage in social justice work and structure conversations around issues around educators’ deep-seated beliefs about the intersection of race, social class and student ability that often need to be confronted when promoting equity. Such dialogue can often be very difficult and requires a high level of trust within the group. When trusting relationships are present, it is possible that the fact that PLNs exist outside of educators’ community of practice may enable dialogue around sensitive topics that people may not wish to discuss within the bounds of their own work setting. As achieving social justice is a policy goal of many systems across the globe, understanding the contributions of PLNs would be instructive.

Examining the emotional dimensions of work within PLNs also deserves further attention. [Schnellert and Butler \(2021\)](#) discuss the affective elements of the PLN they studied, noting the positive feelings of excitement, support and a sense of community that teachers experienced in the PLN. This helped to support teachers’ co-construction of

knowledge. In my own work with colleagues studying professional learning communities, we have found that collaboration brings a range of emotions to teachers' professional lives, ranging from positive to negative (Datnow and Park, 2019; Weddle *et al.*, 2019). Collaborative spaces can be spaces of joyful productive learning, inspiring teachers and helping them to navigate new policy demands, but they can also be draining, ridden with conflict or feel like a waste of time (Datnow and Park, 2019). Needless to say, teachers are much more likely to invest energy in professional learning experiences that feel positive. The notion of reciprocity is also important in the emotions of collaborative work. In one study colleagues and I conducted, a teacher poignantly explained dissatisfaction for always being on the giving end in her grade level PLC, rarely receiving anything in return from her colleagues (Weddle *et al.*, 2019). It would be useful to examine the emotions that educators experience in the context of a PLN and how these emotions play a role in knowledge brokering.

How might PLNs be studied in the future? The articles in this issue use a range of methodological approaches including quasi-experimental design studies linking PLN activities to student outcomes, social network analysis, surveys and case studies and other qualitative research studies involving interviews, observations and document review, among others. MacGregor's (2021) article specifically examines measurement tools for capturing the knowledge production that may take place within a PLN. Regardless of the method used, there is a general interest in examining the effects of PLNs, most often for the learning of the participants involved and sometimes also for the students in settings; however, this appears to be a more distal relationship. As there is no one best way to examine PLNs, bringing a range of methodological and theoretical tools to bear will help yield new lessons for the field. As Rodway *et al.* (2021) state, "developing our understanding of educational phenomena such as knowledge brokering is a collective endeavor that can only be accomplished through a broad and varied network of researchers collaboratively contributing to building this knowledge" (p.).

In fact, MacGregor (2021) suggests that including stakeholders in the development of measurement tools can help us better understand the impact of research practice partnerships. While not all PLNs fit the characterization of a research practice partnership, indeed some do. Up to now, measuring the impact of research partnerships has proved challenging (Henrick *et al.*, 2017; MacGregor, 2021). Interestingly, some of the dimensions upon which Henrick *et al.* (2017) suggest that research practice partnerships should be assessed are also criteria upon which PLNs in general may be assessed. These include the extent to which they build trust and cultivate partnership, the use of research (evidence) to inform action, collaboration for the purpose of reaching the organization's goals, generating knowledge to inform improvement more generally and building the capacity of those involved to engage in partnership work. In a research practice partnership that my colleagues and I are involved in with a local school system, we have found it beneficial to involve stakeholders from the very beginning of the work. As researchers, we engaged educators who were part of a cross-school PLN called the "Teacher Think Tank" in the generation of research questions to guide the project. This began by asking teachers what the most pressing questions they wished to address regarding children's learning in their classrooms and building a project around these concerns (Wishard-Guerra *et al.*, 2020). This approach allowed teachers to become active stakeholders from the instantiation of the work.

As my comments reveal, this special issue offers much to learn and much to build upon. Each article provides novel insights, either in terms of contributing to our understanding of PLNs, knowledge brokering and/or how to study them. As a group, this special issue is a valuable field-building activity, contributing innovative findings from research across the globe using a range of methods. I look forward to learning more about the work that follows

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