

Educational Reform Networks: Changes in the Forms of Reform

ANN LIEBERMAN

Teachers College, Columbia University

MAUREEN GROLNICK

Teachers College, Columbia University

New professional learning “networks” are expanding which link people together for common purposes of learning. These networks typically involve a sense of shared purpose, psychological support, voluntary participation and a facilitator. A number of specific networks are described. Analysis shows that networks have great power, but they are also fragile, necessitating continuous negotiation of tensions.

THE REFORM MOVEMENT AND NETWORKING

Even as public schools struggle to serve the needs of all children in an increasingly diverse population, the changing nature of our technology and economy has raised the stakes for education. Without a rewarding or stable market for unskilled or semi-skilled workers, economic mobility has become increasingly dependent on skills and competencies taught in a school setting, and on certifications of high school and college degrees. At the same time, as communities diversify and fragment, schools remain one of the few unifying centers to which most members of our society belong at some time in their lives.

In attempting to reshape classroom practices created for the social and economic realities of the last century, many teachers, administrators and researchers have become members of networks committed to building educational programs that better reflect the needs of contemporary students, schools and communities. While some of these networks have ideological foundations such as a commitment to democratic decision-making, many are joined together by interests in subject area, technology, pedagogy and school change.¹

Since educational approaches that depend on teacher interdependence and collaboration in the construction of curriculum differ fundamentally from the norms of a profession that has traditionally isolated its members with their classrooms, ideological and technological changes inherent in reform efforts have elicited an unprecedented interest in networks, coalitions and school/university partnerships.

Teachers, administrators and researchers, many for the first time in their professional lives, are making common cause with one another as colleagues. These collaborations are helping to redefine professional learning by going beyond the often didactic forms of traditional professional development to engage and involve participants actively in their own learning.

The necessity for building a professional community has become a recurring theme in reform literature (Lieberman, 1988; Little, 1993; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). Contemporary research is documenting the need for genuine collegiality, support for teacher learning, faculty innovation and continued professional commitment – all characteristics of professional community (McLaughlin & Talbert, p. 9).

THEORIZING ABOUT NETWORKS

Encouraged in part by change theory coming out of the locally based community organization reform work of the 60's, and by earlier interest in studying networks as sources of influence (Kadushin, 1976) – educators, sociologists and political scientists developed an interest in this form of social organization as a vehicle for educational reform. They studied such networks, theorized about their potential and actively tried to implement them. Their work – often linked to research on existing educational networks – developed definitions, described various types of networks and offered analyses of how they function.

The term network is understood to refer to a social web of people connected by links over which such things as objects, labor, affection, evaluation, knowledge prescription, influence and power flow, (Miles, 1978, p. 2) and in which most participants are connected with each other through no more than two links (Kadushin, 1976). Networks link different kinds of people for different purposes, using a variety of forms.

Networks can be distinguished from each other based on the degree to which they are “instituted,” the nature of their links and the extent to which they are visible. American political parties, for example, are highly instituted, are interstitial in their links and very visible while “corporate overlap” (the practice of overlapping membership among corporate boards) is instituted, interstitial, but generally invisible. (The Mafia, job-finding nets and invisible colleges – the connections researchers use to share scientific information – are also in this category (Kadushin, 1976). They can also be distinguished on the basis of their function or purpose such as community groups that operate in a community development, social planning or social action (or “movement”) model (Rosenbaum, 1977). Community development style groups assume that the problem facing their community is a lack of communication and common purpose and they try to bring all elements of the community together in commonly supported projects. Groups that adopt a social planning model are normally found in more prosperous communities and assume that their function revolves around long term local planning and analysis.

In contrast to these more collaborative approaches, the social action model operates on the assumption that the main problem they face is a larger community characterized by an unjust hierarchy of power and privilege. Such groups see their task as that of confronting an unyielding establishment (Rosenbaum, 1977).

Community action groups sustain themselves by imbuing their membership with a strong “we against thee” ethos and necessarily engage in conflict (Rosenbaum, 1977). Such groups depend heavily on leaders who normally also have other daily life commitments and require effective staff support if they are to be successful. Community planning groups are also very leadership dependent, relying heavily on professional research and development staff. The function of these groups also requires that they work closely with (many would argue come under the domination of) the business and government organizations and agencies from which it normally must seek the funds necessary to sustain its cadre of professional staff (not to mention the access necessary to enable its plans and programs to have some chance of being adopted) (Rosenbaum, 1977). In contrast to these two, the community development style organization requires leadership that is focused on and skilled at facilitation as they try to bring more and more people into the organization (Rosenbaum, 1977). While educational networks might superficially appear to conform to this last model, there are certainly elements of confrontation in many reform initiatives – especially those intended primarily to meet the needs of poor and minority children. In other efforts strategic collaboration with business and government organizations that have power and influence may also be problematic.

In addition to incorporating elements of the community action and community development models, most educational reform networks also function as practitioner networks. Common to many professions long before they developed in education, these networks connect practitioners across organizations. They can provide a vehicle for sharing information and serve as a route to professional mobility. Practitioner networks create a sense of professional belonging and offer a source of status and prestige to participants (Schön, 1977).

Whatever model they adopt, educational networks share a number of characteristics. These include:

- a sense of being an alternative to established systems
- a feeling of shared purpose
- some mix of sharing and psychological support
- an effective facilitator
- an emphasis on voluntary participation and equal treatment

(Parker, 1977)

If success is measured in terms of simple survival, not all networks make it. If, in addition, the success of educational reform networks is to be judged in terms of the persistence of their innovations, few of the 1970’s educational reform networks accomplished their mission. Networks such as the Boston West Biology Teachers’ Network, the National Diffusion Network, the Ford Foundation Comprehensive School Improvement Program, the Northern Westchester Resource Network, and

the Tri-University Network have left us with an important fund of knowledge and experience, but little in the way of lasting educational reform. The goal of educational networkers has been to bring together combinations of teachers, school administrators, university personnel, parents and community members – within or across role groups – to enact reforms that will enable local schools to better meet the needs of students. However, the intractable quality of our century-old school “grammar,” and the fragile and often ephemeral nature of social networks, suggest that there is much to be understood if this approach is to be successful.

We know from work done in the 1970’s that networking leads to the need for cognitive flexibility and the ability to play complex roles, but that within organizations those most likely to participate are managers – those with a more cosmopolitan rather than local identification (Granovetter, 1973, 1983). We also know that successful networks are based on voluntary participation and egalitarian treatment (Parker, 1977). Even as their popularity spreads and their numbers grow, networks should not be too tightly structured or formally organized. They thrive on the unpredictability, serendipity and informality that supports the initiative, energy, peer support, shared meaning and trust characteristic of many networks (Miles, 1978). These analyses are helpful, but they also suggest dilemmas. Teachers are part of a profession that has long isolated them in the classroom. Far from being cosmopolitan, many would not include the district, or even the whole of their building, as part of their territory. Many networks directed towards systemic change are based on a coalition of districts rather than individuals. While the superintendent and her cabinet may volunteer, the teachers are drafted. The public school system, like most organizations, is based on a system of hierarchy. Treating the superintendent as equal to a classroom teacher re-orders the relationship in a way that is very different from the culture of the school. In order to effect a significant transformation in American education, networks must have an impact that goes beyond a small group of teachers or a few schools. As the network grows, this becomes more and more difficult to accomplish without organization and structure.

STUDYING CONTEMPORARY NETWORKS

At the National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching (NCREST) at Teachers College we have been learning more about educational reform networks, while helping to support and, in some cases, organize them. Extended discussions with the leaders of three of the networks organized by NCREST led us to study a larger number of networks – 16 in all. We sought answers to such questions as: How do these networks evolve and take shape, and how do they build commitment to common purposes? What activities bind people together in these networks and how are they organized? Who leads these networks and how do they do it? What institutional supports do these networks depend on and from where does the money come? What tensions and dilemmas do they face in the process of developing and sustaining themselves?

We chose networks that had been in existence long enough to have a history and that linked people together who were of different status and who played many roles. We also looked for networks that reflected a variety of organizational forms. In addition to interviewing the leaders, we collected their newsletters and other print materials to expand our understanding and gain further insight into these seemingly improvisational arrangements that were so hard to characterize theoretically or conceptually, but so effective in practice.

HOW DO THESE NETWORKS EVOLVE?

“You’ve got to have a compelling idea . . . a dust particle around which to coalesce . . . but it has to be compelling to the *coalesces*.” (Network Leader)

We found that the individual story of each network’s inception and evolution was very much a function of the context from which they emerged. They developed in many different ways. Some began with informal conversations which led to broader and deeper purposes, while others started with a lofty vision and then developed practical ways of engaging people in the day-to-day work that supported that vision. Still other networks were begun by charismatic leaders who represented, or even embodied, educational values that were cherished by participants. Viewed close up, any one of these processes could seem almost untidy – even happenstance – as common purposes and concerns brought participants together around a “compelling dust particle.”

We began in one rural school where the principal wanted to change. Another school heard about our discussions . . . then seven to eight other schools eventually came to a meeting and said, “Let’s form a league looking at schools as democratic institutions. (Network Leader)

PATTERNS OF DEVELOPMENT

Tracked from a distance, the networks we studied followed at least four discernible patterns. For some, (like Foxfire, and The League of Professional SCHOOLS described above), it was a slow, evolving process in which one activity gave rise to another and eventually led to the need for a more systematic way of connecting. Others, (the National Network for Educational Renewal and DEWEY), were more intentional from the outset. They originated with an explicit plan, such as linking the restructuring of schools with the simultaneous renewal of teacher education, or connecting districts with similar populations and a commitment to equity in education. In a third pattern we observed, participants were drawn together by a strong leader who embodied their educational values and vision, (North Dakota Study Group, Harvard Principals’ Center). In a fourth pattern, networks were formed to support educators as they tried to develop and support their reform ideas in an indifferent or even hostile environment, (Center for Collaborative Education in New York City).