SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT NETWORKS AND COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

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In the current international policy environment, teachers are viewed as learning-oriented adaptive experts. Required to be able to teach increasingly diverse sets of learners, teachers must be competent in complex academic content, skilful in the craft of teaching and able to respond to fast changing economic and policy imperatives. The knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for this complex profession requires teachers to engage in collaborative and networked career-long learning. The types of learning networks emerging to meet this need comprise a variety of collaborative arrangements including inter-school engagement, as well as collaborations with learning partners, such as universities or policy-makers. More understanding is required, however, on how learning networks can deliver maximum benefit for both teachers and students.

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SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT NETWORKS AND COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

Fostering Systematic Change in Challenging Contexts

BY

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We want to dedicate this book to all the school leaders that work hard for the education of their students. We also want to dedicate this book to the families of these leaders, and to our families, that support and allow us to concentrate our energy to promote the systemic improvement of education.

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ACRONYMS

MINEDUC   → Chilean Ministry of Education (in Spanish,
              Ministerio de Educación).
PLN   → Professional Learning Network.
PME   → Educational Improvement Plan (in Spanish,
              Plan de Mejoramiento Escolar).

SIMCE   →   System of Measurement of Educational
                       Achievement (in Spanish, Sistema de
                       Medición de la Calidad de la Educación).
SIN   →   School Improvement Network.
UNESCO   →   United Nations Educational, Scientific and
                       Cultural Organization.

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INTRODUCTION

Education decentralization has been a prominent feature of educational reforms across various nations, under the assumption that local problems require local solutions (McGinn & Welsh, 1999). However, in many countries, decentralization has been paradoxically accompanied by centralization in school governance and decision over curriculum and instruction, especially by the implementation of standardized accountability measures, which increase teacher and principal responsibilities and decrease their autonomy (Jeong & Luschei, 2018). Also, while some educational reforms that have relied on decentralization have had a positive impact in some schools, many others have struggled to develop the necessary capacity to improve (Wohlstetter, Malloy, Chau, & Polhemus, 2003). As a way to address this issue, researchers have highlighted networking as a good strategy to build teachers' and principals' capacities through collaboration between schools, promoting a systemic vision of educational improvement (Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2010; Chapman, 2013; Muijs, 2010; Muijs, West, & Ainscow, 2010; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016).

Chile joined this international trend by developing a set of ambitious reforms in the past five years, prompting a move toward a collaborative educational culture among schools. To bring this principle to practice, in 2015 the Chilean Ministry of Education (MINEDUC), through its General Education

Division, launched the School Improvement Network (SIN) strategy. More than 500 networks were created to support state-funded schools across all 15 regions of the country. These networks bring together an average of 10 schools, each represented by their principal and curriculum coordinator, in addition to a representative of the local education authority and a ministry supervisor. They meet monthly throughout the school year, which runs from March to December, with the purpose of generating and transferring good practices and analyzing improvement processes among school leaders (MINEDUC, 2016a).

The implementation of the SIN strategy represents a radical cultural change, since competition is a prominent feature of the Chilean school system due to its market-oriented principles. Since the 1980s, Chile, as many educational systems around the world (Apple, 2005; McCarthy, Pitton, Kim, & Monje, 2009; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), has applied market-oriented principles to education policy using the discourse of quality assurance and accountability to argue that competition would drive educational improvement (Ahumada, Montecinos, & González, 2012; Falabella, 2016). The marketization and privatization of education challenges the values of collaboration, trust and collective learning that school networks promote as paths for change and improvement. Far from promoting sustainable and positive changes, market-oriented educational policies have been associated with an increase of public school closings, escalating the gentrification and segregation of education and cities, harming traditionally marginalized minority groups (Lipman, 2011; McCarthy & Sanya, 2014; Núñez, Soto, & Solís, 2013; Pino-Yancovic, 2015). This global scenario makes the case of Chile even more interesting to study because it maintains and promotes contradictory policies for the same declared goal: improve the quality of education. Fundamentally, at stake is

the understanding of what educational improvement means and entails. While high-stakes individual accountability policies attribute educational progress to each individual school, the logic of school networks relies on educational improvement as a systemic task (González, Pino, & Ahumada, 2017).

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORKS

The SINs resemble what the literature identifies as Professional Learning Networks (PLNs). PLNs are composed by a group of professionals who engage in collaborative learning processes with others, outside of their everyday community of practice, with the general goal to improve teaching and learning in their own schools (Brown & Poortman, 2018). In fact, certain conditions associated with the effectiveness of PLNs are relevant for SINs: *purpose*, *collaboration* and *inquiry*.

One of the most recurrent recommendation for effective PLNs is that they should have a clear, shared and specific *purpose* (Chapman et al., 2016a; Hubers & Poortman, 2018; Leithwood, 2018, Leithwood & Azah, 2016; Muijs et al., 2010; Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016; Poortman & Brown, 2018). In competitive contexts, such as the Chilean one, Armstrong and Ainscow (2018) argue that network purposes should specify the particular benefits that the networks will add to each member and their educational institution, a condition that Brown and Poortman (2018) relate to explicit and meaningful individual and group learning goals.

Collaboration is another condition for effective PLNs. The essence of networks is that two or more participants interact and share knowledge and resources (Chapman, 2015; Katz & Earl, 2010; Muijs et al., 2010). Collaboration requires an honest commitment to share and work together among different people and an involvement of these people with the

purpose for which they are collaborating (Duffy & Gallagher, 2016; Muijs et al., 2010).

Finally, the literature highlights collaborative *inquiry* as methodology of work that allows participants to collect, analyze and monitor the activities of the network (Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick, & West, 2016; Chapman et al., 2016a; DeLuca, Shulha, Luhanga, Shulha, Christou, & Klinger, 2015; Poortman & Brown, 2018). Collaborative inquiry is carried out through a cyclical process (DeLuca et al., 2015; Pino, González, & Ahumada, 2018). This methodological approach to PLNs also involves what Hubers and Poortman (2018) refer to as *reflective professional inquiry*, where participants in the PLN "discuss their underlying belief about teaching; share and clarify their pedagogical motives; collectively question ineffective teaching routines; and find proactive ways to acknowledge and respond to differences and conflict" (p. 199).

The central tenant of PLNs is that, by an active participation in their networks, all members of the PLN will benefit from a collective learning process. School leaders will be able to apply the knowledge generated within their networks back in their own schools, and the ultimate goal of this process is improving students' learning. In this regard, it is relevant to highlight that PLNs can serve multiple student learning goals, not only what is measured by standardized tests. For instance, students' learning can also address "children's physical and mental well-being and their fortitude, as well as more instrumental notions such as children's learning and academic performance" (Brown & Flood, 2019, p. 8).

To mobilize knowledge among networks and schools, PLNs are composed by *brokers*, network members who occupy key structural positions to link networks with their own institution. They are responsible to connect, share and mobilize knowledge between networks, schools and other

relevant institutions in their immediate context, crossing the borders between and within their own community of practice (Poortman & Brown, 2018).

Brown and Flood (2019) identify three main courses of action that school leaders can perform to brokerage the PLN knowledge once they are back in their schools: (1) keep participating staff on track: leaders ensure that the PLN projects remain a priority in the hearts and minds of staff and teachers; (2) making the PLN purposeful: support and remind school staff that the PLN projects and activities are not additional tasks for the school, rather they are part of their current functions, making sure that staff is aware of the importance and potential impact of PLNs; and (3) formalize PLN action as a priority in linking the PLN activities with their own school improvement plan, staff hours, school goals and strategies.

The effort and dedication to support effective school networks and PLNs indicates that is beneficial for principals, teachers and students. There is strong evidence that school networks promote principals' leadership capacities and improve teachers' practices (Chapman et al., 2015, 2016a; Leithwood & Azah, 2016). Some studies also indicate that schools that participate in effective school networks improve students' outcomes (Chapman & Muijs, 2013; Hadfield & Chapman, 2009). The literature also emphasizes that school networks provide the opportunity to achieve cost-effective educational innovations (Munby & Fullan, 2016). In addition, studies on PLNs highlight that they can mobilize a wide range of research knowledge allowing to improve educational practices of schools that compose the network (Brown & Flood, 2019). Finally, the development of school networks as regional or national strategies, support bottom-up policies that can better articulate a diversity of demands of communities, school leaders and teachers (Azorín & Muijs, 2017).

Despite these benefits, evidence also stresses that ineffective networks could lead to unintended consequences and be harmful for educational systems (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016). For instance, network participants can engage in interorganizational struggles, which could lead to losing sight of the public objectives that networks should be serving. Also, networks can engage in *groupthink*, being self-protective about mainstream group ideas and solutions to problems (Ehren & Perryman, 2018; Mayne & Rieper, 2003). Centralized networks can also incite resistance from their participants, especially when they function in a hierarchical manner, forcing diverse actors to apply and replicate specific strategies, instead of promoting learning based on collaboration and horizontality (Greany & Ehren, 2016). Additionally, external factors, such as a market-oriented and competitive environment, can inhibit collaborative practices and generate distrust among participants of networks, especially when they do not perceive direct benefits of participating in these types of collaborative arrangements (Armstrong & Ainscow, 2018). Finally, studies about PLNs in contexts of accountability and high-stakes testing pressure professionals obstructing their possibilities to reflect about data analysis to implement new practices (Godfrey, 2017, in Poortman & Brown, 2018).

BOOK GUIDING QUESTIONS

All the unintended consequences mentioned above justify the relevance of studying how policies that promote networks of schools are developed, and how they operate within a context that constrains and hinders collaboration. There are not many studies that follow the design and implementation of school networks as they occur (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012),

and Chile offers a unique opportunity to research in detail how the SINs have been developed and enacted. Most of the literature on networks in education looks at experiences in Europe and North America (Rincón-Gallardo & Fullan, 2016), with fewer evidence from education systems in the Global South, such as Chile. Additionally, for the past 40 years, competition among schools for pupil enrollment has been the main driver of educational improvement in Chile (Carrasco & Fromm, 2016; Verger, Bonal, & Zancajo, 2016). Although schools are now expected to work in networks, they are held to account individually through high-stakes standardized testing and external inspections, then, there are reasonable uncertainties for SINs to be able to support the development of collaborative practices and mobilize knowledge between schools.

The National Education Quality Assurance Agency creates an annual classification scheme, based mostly in the System of Measurement of Educational Achievement (in Spanish Sistema de Medición de la Calidad de la Educación, SIMCE), where schools are individually categorized with a high, medium, medium-low or insufficient performance. Schools that are classified as insufficient for four years can be closed by the Ministry of Education, which makes them face extreme challenging internal and external circumstances and a great deal of pressure to improve (Pino-Yancovic, Salinas, & Oyarzún, 2016).

The clash of opposite values, reflected in specific educational policies, is examined in this book by researching empirical data about the design and implementation of the SIN strategy at a national scale. Specifically, this book analyzes the collaborative practices that principals and curriculum coordinators perceive in their networks and how the knowledge that is shared and produced within networks can (or cannot) be useful to respond to challenges that school leaders face in the

daily life of their own schools. Specifically, three main questions guide the research presented in this book:

(**1**) What kind of knowledge is mobilized within SINs and among the schools that compose them?

(**2**) What types of collaborative practices among school leaders are promoted by the SINs?

(**3**) What are the challenges and possibilities for the development of sustainable school networks in a market-oriented educational context?

To answer these questions, from a mixed-methods perspective (Greene, 2007), we analyze the practices that occur within SINs employing collaborative inquiry as a framework, based on the theoretical review of DeLuca et al. (2015). Specifically, collaborative inquiry constitutes the substantive theory to mix the findings of two independent studies about the SIN policy. The primary research is a multi-site case study conducted in 2016 to characterize the process and value of collaborative practices of 15 SINs from different regions of the country. The supplementary research is a national study of SINs functioning from the perspective of principals and curriculum coordinators, based on data from an online questionnaire answered by 398 of the 483 existing networks in 2017. This research provides evidence of the depth and spread of the knowledge and practices that participants from these networks state that they make use of in their own schools.

The findings of this mixed-methods study highlight both challenges and opportunities for SIN to be sustainable as a national strategy for systemic improvement, within a particularly challenging context for fostering collaboration. In general, SINs are highly valued as a significant strategy to