IMPROVING THE RELATIONAL SPACE OF CURRICULUM REALISATION

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IMPROVING THE RELATIONAL SPACE OF CURRICULUM REALISATION: SOCIAL NETWORK INTERVENTIONS

BY

CLAIRE SINNEMA
The University of Auckland, New Zealand

ALAN J. DALY
University of California, USA

JOELLE RODWAY
Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada

DARREN HANNAH
The University of Auckland, New Zealand

RACHEL CANN
The University of Auckland, New Zealand

AND

YI-HWA LIOU
National Taipei University of Education, Taiwan

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Claire Sinnema is an Associate Professor at The University of Auckland. Her research deals with educational improvement and the realisation of curriculum and other educational policies in practice. Her work addresses the role of curriculum design, networks, practitioner inquiry, leadership and problem-solving in educational contexts.

Alan J. Daly is a Professor and the Director of Educational Leadership Doctoral Programs in the Department of Education Studies at the University of California, San Diego. His research primarily focusses on the role of social networks and their impacts on social systems.

Joelle Rodway is an Assistant Professor at the Memorial University of Newfoundland. Her research is on the role of social capital in whole system educational change.

Darren Hannah is an EdD graduate of The University of Auckland. His research interest is the generation of actionable knowledge that can be used for organisational improvement through the diagnosis of and engagement with theories of action.

Rachel Cann is a PhD candidate at the University of Auckland. Her research relates to the individual, relational and organizational influences on educator wellbeing, drawing on positive psychology and social network theory.

Yi-Hwa Liou, Professor of the Department of Educational Management at the National Taipei University of Education, Taiwan. She researches leadership and development and professional and networked learning communities using social network analysis.

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This book is both *about* collaboration and arises *from* collaboration. We would like to acknowledge the new relational ties that were established between our project team, and the many teachers and curriculum leaders in schools and across the two communities of learning that we worked in. The design of our project was co-constructed with many of them, and we greatly value their commitment to and energy for the work! We have enormous respect for their receptiveness to new ways of thinking about their leadership practice, and their efforts to foreground the relational space in support of curriculum realisation.

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INTRODUCTION

In this book, we offer insights into how interventions with curriculum leaders can respond to relational patterns in their networks in ways that improve the relational space, creating better conditions for curriculum change to be realised.

The unfurling frond of a silver fern that graces the cover of this book is known in Aotearoa New Zealand as a 'koru'. The koru symbolises new life, growth and strength; ideas that are at the heart of the work we share about curriculum change and leadership.

Our work sought to give curriculum leaders in two kāhui ako – or communities of learning – opportunities to breathe new life into the relational space in which they work; in particular, the various relationships between and amongst people. Our aim was to help them to recognise the importance of the relational space and to improve the social conditions for collaborative work. It also sought to grow relational ties within and across schools in ways that support them to function as professional learning networks (Brown & Poortman, 2017; Poortman, Brown, & Schildkamp, 2022) and to support teachers to enact curricula that make a difference in learners' lives. And finally, our work sought to give curriculum leaders the strength to do their work, by providing them insights into their network, and action planning tools to make improvements.

Curriculum change is a constant in educational contexts seeking to improve equity and excellence, but ambitious goals of curriculum reform are seldom fully realised. We argue that all too often very little attention is paid to the relational space in which those reform ideas land. Strong (together with weak) relational ties amongst all of those involved within and across schools are critical for the success of curriculum reform. And curriculum leaders, as we see it, share responsibility not just for the content and enactment of curriculum, but also for the relational space in which that work takes place. This work recognises that the social processes involved in change stretch across individuals and levels within a system. It shifts the perspective from a focus on the individual and their attributes to the dynamics of a larger social network; the constellation of relationships amongst educators that give life to curriculum change and that support teachers to improve learners' experience of curriculum. The intervention we share in this book, therefore, aimed to support the leaders involved to make positive change in the relational aspects of their schools and wider network, to improve the conditions that are essential for aspirations of curriculum reforms to be realised.

Many change agents traditionally focus their improvement efforts on formal structures, processes and accountability levers. We supported these curriculum leaders to improve the relational linkages between individuals through which curriculum change can move.

While social network interventions are increasingly recognised as critical to educational improvement, often there is silence on the detail of intervention approaches and the underpinning theories that give rise to them. In this book, our aim is to make our intervention approach transparent so that others can draw on and adapt it in ways that are relevant in their own contexts.

In Part 1, we introduce the concept of social capital and highlight its relevance to curriculum improvement and curriculum realisation efforts. We contextualise our work in relation to social network interventions in contexts beyond education. We then introduce the particular theory of action approach we use to explain our intervention approach and describe how we collected and analysed data to give insight into shifts in the relational space in the two networks we worked with.

In Part 2, we make visible what we did, how and why. First, we present the big picture of our approach, and next we detail the purpose and activities of four *hui*, or gatherings, of curriculum leaders. The first hui was to provide *grounded stimulus* by engaging our participants with theoretical, conceptual and empirical insights relating to social capital, social networks and collaboration. The second hui saw our participants working together through a *guided discovery* process, engaging with maps and statistics from a social network survey of their own network, which provided a focus for a problem-solving approach. Our curriculum leaders agreed on problematic patterns to be the focus of action plans for improvement, offered ideas about the causes of those patterns, and proposed solutions logically linked to those causes. In the third hui, we worked with leaders from one network to refine their plan and to provide feedback on their leadership approach. In the final hui, we used a step-back consultancy process whereby each network took on the action plan of the other, in a way that gave rise to diverse perspectives about how to improve it.

Part 3 sets out the results of our efforts – and especially those of curriculum leaders who engaged deeply with this work. In the year and a half between time 1 and time 2 administrations of the social network survey, and following

the four hui that comprised our intervention, the data showed a range of promising shifts. In this section, we detail how the relational infrastructure supporting curriculum change has been strengthened in the kāhui ako we worked with. These relational shifts are headed in the right direction and suggest the strengthening of social capital that will serve curriculum realisation efforts well. In closing, we reflect on key things we learned from an intervention perspective and present those as a network of social network intervention considerations.

PART 1

SETTING THE SCENE

Intervening on social networks is important because they exert powerful influences on the way people feel and behave. These effects can be observed in families, friendship networks and workplaces as well as in many other contexts. For example, people are more likely to become happy if their friends are happy and more likely to quit smoking if their friends do (Christakis & Fowler, 2013; Fowler & Christakis, 2008). In the workplace, employee wellbeing increases when colleagues receive leadership coaching (O'Connor & Cavanagh, 2013), and people are more likely to seek advice from a colleague who is similar to them (Cross, Borgatti, & Parker, 2001). In schools, social networks influence innovation (Liou & Daly, 2018a), the improvement of teaching practice (Sinnema, Liou, Daly, Cann, & Rodway, 2021) and curriculum and policy implementation (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Hopkins, Ozimek, & Sweet, 2017).

The potential for these kinds of impacts was the impetus for the Better Together intervention at the heart of this book, and in this part, we set the scene for our project. First, we provide theoretical context. Chapter 1 presents a social network lens on the work of curriculum realisation, highlighting how

the relational space impacts on the success of curriculum reform. We use the term realisation to refer to the aspirations of curriculum change impacting changes in practice in schools and classrooms, and learners experiencing the curriculum in line with those aspirations. We introduce, in Chapter 2, the empirical context; we outline approaches that have been taken to social network interventions in the field of health, business and education. We also propose a framework for the use of data in social network interventions in education. In Chapter 3, we focus on the theoretical and conceptual context explaining the theory of action approach used throughout the book to describe our intervention. Finally, we turn to the practical context introducing the policy and practice landscape of our project in Chapter 4.

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A SOCIAL NETWORK LENS ON CURRICULUM REALISATION

Central to educational improvement efforts is the improvement of curriculum policies that set out aspirations for learners and the realisation of those policies in practice. We refer here to the formal curriculum; the policies or plans – be they at national, provincial/regional or school level – documenting what learners should learn and what teachers' practice should address. The approach to and detail of curriculum policies varies across nations and jurisdictions, but they do share many common elements. These include, depending on the orientation of the curriculum: statements of vision or purpose; important principles or values; subjects or areas of learning; objectives, goals, learning outcomes or standards of some sort; and, increasingly, other cross-cutting elements such as skills, competencies, capabilities or cross-cutting themes. They also typically outline progression in some way, for example in relation to stages, phases, levels, or steps to which the former elements apply.

In the broad field of educational improvement, a central question of concern is: What should be improved? While many

improvement efforts focus on teachers and teaching, on leaders and leading, or on schools and schooling, they all share an ultimate concern for improvements for learners and learning. In this sense, the curriculum becomes critical because curricula convey aspirations for learners in the present and for their future; they set out learners' curriculum entitlement. A curriculum is, therefore, an essential tool for determining priorities in educational improvement efforts and for assessing the effectiveness of those efforts.

Curricula are not only essential – but also contested and, as Wood (2021) describes, fiercely so. They are complex to design and are 'a product of contending social, political and historical forces' (p. 55). Curriculum reforms, like other educational reforms,

> *have particular histories, and all of them are driven not only by technical considerations but also profoundly by cultural, political, and economic projects and by ideological and valuative visions of what schools should do and whom they should serve. (Apple, 2015, p. 1079)*

This landscape of curriculum aspiration, entitlement and contestation has far-reaching implications for the networks of educators charged with realising a curriculum in their day-to-day work. It also results in curriculum change being a constant in the work of educational practitioners (including teachers, teaching assistants and leaders), policy-makers and researchers. We use the term *curriculum change* since it encompasses both curriculum reform instigated at system levels, and changes to elements of a curriculum, or instigated by those in schools and other educational settings. Curriculum change is constant because, in any given jurisdiction at any time, educationalists are likely to be either in the middle