

EMERALD PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORKS SERIES

# Innovations in Teachers' Professional Learning Networks in China

Efforts towards Educational Equality



Wangbei Ye

INNOVATIONS IN  
TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL  
LEARNING NETWORKS  
IN CHINA

# EMERALD PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORKS SERIES

**Series Editors:** Chris Brown, University of Portsmouth, UK  
and Cindy Poortman, University of Twente, The Netherlands

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 require 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 policymakers. More understanding is required, however, on how learning networks can deliver maximum benefit for both teachers and students.

*Emerald Professional Learning Networks Series* aims to expand current understanding of professional learning networks and the impact of harnessing effective networked collaboration.

Published in this series:

- Formalise, Prioritise and Mobilise: How School Leaders Secure the Benefits of Professional Learning Networks  
*Chris Brown and Jane Flood*
- School Improvement Networks and Collaborative Inquiry: Fostering Systematic Change in Challenging Contexts  
*Mauricio Pino Yancovic, Alvaro González Torres, Luis Abumada Figueroa and Christopher Chapman*
- Professional Learning Networks: Facilitating Transformation in Diverse Contexts with Equity-seeking Communities  
*Leyton Schnellert*
- Lessons in School Improvement from Sub-Saharan Africa: Developing Professional Learning Networks and School Communities  
*Miriam Mason and David Galloway*
- Professional Learning Networks in Design-Based Research Interventions  
*Mei Kuin Lai and Stuart McNaughton*
- Improving the Relational Space of Curriculum Realisation: Social Network Interventions  
*Claire Sinnema, Alan J. Daly, Joelle Rodway, Darren Hannab, Rachel Cann and Yi-Hwa Liou*

*This page intentionally left blank*

# INNOVATIONS IN TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORKS IN CHINA: EFFORTS TOWARDS EDUCATIONAL EQUALITY

BY

**WANGBEI YE**

*East China Normal University, China*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India  
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited  
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street,  
Leeds LS1 4DL.

First edition 2025

Copyright © 2025 Wangbei Ye.  
Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited.

**Reprints and permissions service**

Contact: [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com)

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. No responsibility is accepted for the accuracy of information contained in the text, illustrations or advertisements. The opinions expressed in these chapters are not necessarily those of the Author or the publisher.

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83608-333-7 (Print)  
ISBN: 978-1-83608-330-6 (Online)  
ISBN: 978-1-83608-332-0 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

# CONTENTS

<i>List of Tables</i>	ix
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
1. Teachers' Professional Learning Networks in China: Tradition, Challenges and Innovations	7
2. Master Teacher Studio Innovation	29
3. Educational Group School Teacher Professional Learning Network Innovation	73
4. Online Teaching Professional Learning Network Innovation During COVID-19	111
5. Teachers' Professional Learning Network Innovation in China: Efforts Towards Educational Equality	143
<i>Index</i>	161

*This page intentionally left blank*

# LIST OF TABLES

## **Tables**

Table 1	Four Rounds of 'Two-Famous Project' in Shanghai (2005–2019)	31
Tables 2	Master Teacher Studio Activity Observation	37
Tables 3	Interviewee List	39
Tables 4	Teacher Education Universities' Educational Groups in China	76
Tables 5	The 9 MP Teachers Interviewed	81
Tables 6	MP Teachers at J School's MP PLN	83
Tables 7	Questionnaire Respondents' Personal Information	120
Tables 8	Ten Most Agreed Aspects as Expressed by Teachers	125
Tables 9	PLN Innovations as Efforts Towards Educational Equality.	158

*This page intentionally left blank*

# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
MOE	Ministry of Education
MP	Moral-Political Education
NPC	National People's Congress
PEP	People's Education Press
PLN	Professional learning network
PRC	People's Republic of China
SES	Socioeconomic status
SRT	Special rank teacher
TPACK	Technological pedagogical content knowledge
TRO	Teaching and research officer
TRG	Teaching and research group

*This page intentionally left blank*

## PREFACE

I have worked as a Teacher Educator at East China Normal University for 13 years. Since 2016, I have been deeply involved in my university's increased contact with and influence on national and local in-service teachers' professional learning networks (PLNs). I have worked with school-level teaching and research groups, local-level teaching and research officer-led PLNs, and cross-school-level Master Teacher Studios in Shanghai, Henan, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Shandong. I have also worked with educational groups and their member schools in 13 provinces in China and served for one year as a local education bureau vice-head in Shanghai to support various national and local innovations for in-service teachers' PLNs in China.

These experiences have pushed me to reflect on and write this book, *Innovations in Teachers' Professional Learning Networks in China: Efforts Towards Educational Equality*. It presents up-to-date research on teachers' PLNs in China and provides accessible, practical, yet scholarly sources of information about teachers' PLN innovations in China, a topic of international concern. It is a sourcebook of ideas for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in teacher education, comparative education, moral education, and education leadership. It also touches on topics in organisational studies, adult learning, and public policy studies.

This book is unique in that it:

- provides an analysis of recent education policy developments in teachers' PLNs in China's rural–urban divide context;
- examines state, region, and school-level teacher professional learning concerns and responses to social transformation and education equality; and
- explores conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches applicable to research on teachers' PLNs.

I hope the reader will find *Innovations in Teachers' Professional Learning Networks in China: Efforts Towards Educational Equality* useful in their teaching, future research, and discourses concerning the aims of teachers' learning.

Wangbei Ye

# INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces innovations in teachers' professional learning networks (PLNs) in China and then provides an overview of the book.

Professional practice in schools and colleges is widely acknowledged as a collaborative activity (e.g. [Bridges & Husbands, 1996](#); [Cheng & Pan, 2019](#)). Teacher PLNs, which are rooted in concepts of professional practice as a collaborative activity, have drawn increasing attention from educators and researchers in various countries in recent decades ([Darling-Harmond et al., 2017](#); [Hairon & Tan, 2017](#)).

However, most studies on teachers' learning in PLNs have focussed on teacher learning within a single school (e.g. [OECD, 2013](#); [Qian & Walker, 2021](#); [Zhang & Wong, 2018](#)). In recent years, cross-school collaboration has come to be viewed as necessary for furthering school improvement and reform and has received attention in many education systems, including those in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and North America (e.g. [Connolly & James, 2006](#); [Giltin, 1999](#); [Ulibarri & Scott, 2017](#); [Ye, 2024](#)). While educational collaboration varies, it generally includes collaborative relationships among teachers and schools, as well as among teachers, university faculty, and administrators.

China is not an exception. China has a teacher PLN tradition, a teaching and research system that takes the form of teaching and research groups (TRGs) in schools. A TRG is

a subject-based department that serves as the structural unit for a school-level teaching organisation (Paine & Ma, 1993). TRGs organise a wide range of learning activities that encourage teachers to open their classrooms to public examination, depend on each other when learning to teach, and gradually develop effective teaching practices. Teaching and research officers (TROs) at the county/district, city, and provincial levels lead teachers' cross-school collaboration through regional TRO-led teacher learning networks. TROs are frontline teachers who have shown excellence in their subject teaching.

In response to various challenges since the 1990s, China has made innovations to its traditional teacher PLNs. First, in the 2000s, changes to Chinese teachers' knowledge and skills required TROs (leaders of traditional teacher PLNs) to abandon their traditional top-down managerial style in favour of a more democratic leadership model.

Second, there have been criticisms of the size of traditional PLNs. As TROs only account for 1% of the teacher population, they are too few to supervise local teachers' professional learning effectively, making PLNs a significant obstacle to teachers' professional collaboration. The corresponding issuance, in the 2000s, of policies like the *Action Plan for Education Revitalisation in the 21st Century* led some Master Teachers in China to establish studios to facilitate in-service teachers' professional development. Master Teachers hold senior professional titles and are known for their subject teaching achievements.

Additionally, online teaching PLNs have been promoted to enhance teachers' professional development in vast rural areas, where remoteness, scattered residents, and insufficient funding have traditionally challenged teacher professional development. During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, China expanded its online PLNs to ensure rural students' equal access to quality education.

Third, due to broad policy concerns, specifically China's promotion of group schools and school districts over the past decade, the traditional three-level PLN structure has changed. In addition to provincial-, city-, district/county-, and school-level teaching and research units arranged by education authorities, school networks (e.g. educational groups and school districts) introduced network-level teacher PLNs that may be located in the same city and may include teachers from member schools in different cities/provinces. An educational group is a cross-school management model that emerged in China as early as the 1990s. Schools, regardless of location and supervised by a core education organisation/school, construct a school collaboration community (the educational group) that follows common educational ideals and regulations to share educational resources for mutual benefit.

This book takes a multi-disciplinary approach to exploring innovations in China's cross-school teacher PLNs.

Chapter 1 provides historical and policy perspectives on the traditions, challenges and innovations in teachers' PLNs in the People's Republic of China (PRC). It introduces the traditional teaching and research units established in the 1950s and led by local TROs at the school, district/county, city, and provincial levels. It also reviews the challenges to traditional PLNs brought by PLN participants' knowledge and skills changes, PLN size and composition, and PLN structure. It briefly summarises policies promoting PLN innovations such as Master Teacher Studios, online teacher PLNs, and educational groups.

Chapter 2 analyses the relationship between teacher professional development and teacher leadership in a cross-school context in the Master Teacher Studio, an innovation in traditional PLNs in China. Using case study data from a Master Teacher Studio in Shanghai, it reports how factors like China's Master Teacher selection policies, assessment policies,

member features, and Chinese culture influence teacher leadership and professional development in PLNs.

Chapter 3 first introduces educational group schools in China and then reviews the literature on organisational learning. It recounts interviews with twelve teachers and group leaders in nine E educational group schools and analyses a case study of one E educational group (School J). The chapter highlights vertical organisational learning for group school teachers, a teachers' organisational learning pattern covering four levels: organisational, individual, group, and organisational within the case School J. The chapter suggests a 'power to/power with' model for understanding teachers' learning through educational group schools.

Chapter 4 first reviews the literature on network governance and weak school improvement, then explores government-led online teaching network governance efforts to improve online teaching in rural regions during the COVID-19 pandemic in China. It finds that governments acted as leaders and facilitators for online teaching PLNs, and collaborative networks were developed, with Master Teachers gaining autonomy and expanding their influence in online teaching PLNs and rural teachers developing their professional competencies and contributing to online teaching PLNs based on their rural context needs.

Chapter 5 offers a reflective analysis. Based on the previous chapters, it proposes a conceptual model that views a series of teachers' PLN innovations in the PRC as a dynamic development to address education equality in the context of China's rural-urban divide. It elaborates on PLN innovation in relation to five key areas: (1) the rural-urban divide context, (2) types of PLN participants, (3) relationships among PLN participants, (4) sharing in PLNs, and (5) expected educational equality outcomes.

While this book cannot describe and analyse every diverse issue in teachers' PLNs in China, it can inform and enrich the growing dialogue on PLN innovation in China and beyond.

## REFERENCES

- Bridges, D., & Husbands, C. (1996). *Consorting and collaborating in the education marketplace*. Falmer.
- Cheng, X., & Pan, X. (2019). English language teacher learning in professional learning communities: A case study of a Chinese secondary school. *Professional Development in Education*, 45(4), 698–712. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2019.1579109>
- Connolly, M., & James, C. (2006). Collaboration for school improvement: A resource dependency and institutional framework of analysis. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 34(1), 69–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143206059540>
- Darling-Hammond, L., Hyer, M., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development*. Learning Policy Institute.
- Giltin, A. (1999). Collaboration and progressive school reform. *Educational Policy*, 13(5), 630–658. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904899013005002>
- Hairon, S., & Tan, C. (2017). Professional learning communities in Singapore and Shanghai: Implications for teacher collaboration. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 47(1), 91–104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2016.1153408>

OECD. (2013). Fostering learning communities among teachers. In *Teaching in focus* (Vol. 4, pp. 1–4). OECD Publishing.

Paine, L., & Ma, L. (1993). Teachers working together: A dialogue on organisational and cultural perspectives of Chinese teachers. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 19(8), 675–697. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-0355\(93\)90009-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-0355(93)90009-9)

Qian, H., & Walker, A. (2021). Creating conditions for professional learning communities (PLCs) in schools in China: The role of school principals. *Professional Development in Education*, 47(4), 586–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2020.1770839>

Ulibarri, N., & Scott, T. (2017). Linking network structure to collaborative governance. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 27(1), 163–181.

Ye, W. (2024). Save a sinking ship: District-led school network governance to transform turnaround schools in Shanghai, China. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 9(1), 37–50.

Zhang, X., & Wong, J. (2018). How do teachers learn together? A study of school-based teacher learning in China from the perspective of organisational learning. *Teachers and Teaching*, 24(2), 119–134. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2017.1388227>

# TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORKS IN CHINA: TRADITION, CHALLENGES AND INNOVATION

## ABSTRACT

*This chapter introduces the traditions of teachers' professional learning networks (PLNs) in the People's Republic of China (PRC), which first developed provincial-, city-, district/county-, and school-level teaching and research units in the 1950s. However, traditional teacher PLNs faced changes in size, composition, structure, and participants' knowledge and skills; thus, innovations emerged, like Master Teacher Studios in the 2000s, online teacher PLNs since early 2003 [and especially during the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19 period)], and educational groups since the 2010s.*

**Keywords:** Tradition; teacher professional learning networks; Master Teacher Studio; online teacher PLN; COVID-19

## TRADITIONS OF TEACHERS' PLNs IN CHINA

A PLN is 'any group [engaged] in collaborative learning with others outside of their everyday community of practice in order to improve teaching and learning' (Brown & Poortman, 2018, p. 1). This broad description encompasses an extensive range of network types within and across schools.

PLNs in the PRC often manifest as teaching and research units. China has long had a centralised education system in which the Ministry of Education (MOE) designs the curriculum and teacher education. Beginning in 1955, China gradually established a multi-level teaching and research system that set teaching and research units in provincial, city, and county/district education bureaux and in schools to ensure the implementation of its centralised curriculum and provide in-service teachers professional training and learning opportunities.

In 1954, Beijing city issued the Municipal Council's *Decision on Improving Primary and Middle School Education Quality* (also known as the 54 Decision), which directed education authorities to 'generally improve education quality, to ensure every school cultivate quality students', set up special organisations, and send special personnel to carry out educational research and supervision work. Local education authorities should enhance management and systematically and frequently examine schools to help improve their teaching (Beijing Municipal Council, 2001). The same year, the MOE shared Beijing's 54 Decision nationwide, asking education authorities at all levels to enhance their supervision of school teaching and advising them to set up special organisations to manage teaching research and supervision – the starting point of China's teaching and research system construction.

School-level teaching and research units are called teaching and research groups (TRGs). A TRG is a subject-based department that serves as the structural unit of a school's