Collaborative Networking in Education: Learning Across International Contexts

Redes de Colaboración en Educación: Aprendiendo a través de Contextos Internacionales

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ABSTRACT:

There is growing consensus on the need to prepare future generations in environments of collaboration and cooperation. This way of understanding education cross borders in the quest for networking. A wide range of theoretical bases supports networking, which underlines its potential in the educational arena. There are few comparative studies that explore the forms that networking takes in education at the international level. This article discusses a series of examples from various countries in order to add to the current knowledge about networking in education in different parts of the world. The examples selected were chosen after a review of the international specialist literature (prior to Covid-19). This was followed by a screening process of the documentary sources based on temporal and thematic criteria, notably including research published in the past decade with content directly related to collaborative networking in diverse educational contexts. Many initiatives have been carried out in a wide range of school settings over the last few years through a combination of top-down interventions, accountability measures and changes in governance arrangements. This article focuses on proposals from countries whose collaboration networks can boast long experiences, together with a synthesis of the main advances reported in the area.

DESCRIPTORES:

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RESUMEN:

Existe un consenso cada vez mayor sobre la necesidad de preparar a las generaciones futuras en entornos de colaboración y de cooperación. Esta forma de entender la educación traspasa fronteras en búsqueda del trabajo en red. Hay una amplia variedad de bases teóricas que apoyan la creación de redes y subrayan su potencial en el ámbito educativo. A nivel internacional, existen pocos estudios comparativos que aporten las formas que adopta el trabajo en red en la educación. En este artículo se presenta una revisión con ejemplos de varios países que permite saber más sobre la evolución del trabajo en red en diferentes partes del mundo. Los ejemplos seleccionados fueron elegidos tras una revisión de la literatura internacional especializada (anterior a Covid-19). A continuación, se llevó a cabo un proceso selectivo de fuentes documentales basado en criterios temáticos y temporales, con investigaciones publicadas principalmente en la última década y contenidos relacionados directamente con el trabajo en red colaborativo en contextos educativos diversos. En los últimos años, se han desarrollado múltiples iniciativas en entornos escolares que han combinado intervenciones de arriba hacia abajo, medidas de rendición de cuentas y cambios en las disposiciones de gobernanza. El artículo se centra en las propuestas de países cuyas redes de colaboración presumen de una larga experiencia, junto con una síntesis de los principales avances registrados en la materia.

1. Introduction

Networking is spreading roots in the field of school effectiveness and school improvement. Since the late 1980s, there has been evidence of schools where teachers have worked collaboratively and developed high levels of personal and professional trust, including various different forms of networking (Hargreaves, 2018). Networking has come to the forefront in recent years and has become a beacon of good practice for innovation and improved learning (Azorín, 2017; López-Yañez et al., 2014; Prenger et al., 2021; Robinson et al., 2020; Schnellert & Butler, 2020). The use of networks in school settings therefore offers many opportunities and promising prospects (Azorín, 2020a; García-Martínez et al., 2018; Murillo & Krichesky, 2015; Organisation for Economic, Co-operation and Development, 2019; Scheleicher, 2018). However, while the potential of learning networks has been recognized as an efficient strategy for improvement in schools, it has also been noted that there are too many teachers who work on their own, and too many isolated schools and researchers, which leads to the conclusion that only by working together can true change be implemented (Murillo, 2009). In a recent interview, Professor Michael Fullan, a leading international education researcher, admitted that those teachers who work alone end up wilting away (Azorín, 2020b). Thus, it can be argued that the inescapable advancement of networking environments is closely linked to the growing number of collaborative alliances and the increasing connections between education stakeholders.

Chapman and Fullan (2007) held that an approach based on collaboration and partnership for equitable improvement may be able to guide the discourse of policies and practices towards a network learning system. In particular, Fullan (2016) stated that the frontier between the school and the outside world is becoming ever easier to cross. The call for collaboration should not, therefore, be postponed any longer. The proliferation of networks as horizontal interaction platforms that can foster and strengthen professional links and communication between people is now a permanent feature of school life (Azorín, 2020d; Azorín & Pont, 2021; Harris, 2020). This article provides a review of educational policies and networking practices in different countries. The next section incorporates information about networking and its importance in the face of a change in education marked by the new times.

2. Networking: The new imperative of education

Networking is becoming an increasingly necessary component in adapting to the demands of contemporary education (Azorín, 2020c). There is no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic has seen an unprecedented acceleration in the use of collaborative networking (Harris et al., 2021). In times of crisis, new opportunities arise for transforming the *status quo* in education. This much-needed renewal of the impetus for survival focuses on connecting to broader collaborative networks (Fullan, 2021). From the point of view of networking and the benefits that it brings to education, the European Commission (2018) has stated:

> *Education systems are becoming increasingly complex in the context of globalisation and digitalisation on the one hand, and decentralisation and school autonomy on the other. There is a keen interest in networks as a tool for better connectivity between stakeholders within and between different levels of the system to achieve defined educational goals and greater equity, efficiency and quality. Furthermore, networks can serve as an environment to explore and pilot new policies, pedagogical ideas and working methods.* (p. 1)

Networks represent an innovative paradigm that is able to promote and support school development and address problems collaboratively and flexibly. It is important to clarify the concept of "collaborative networking in education", which is associated with an extensive group or system of connected people/organization(s) with similar interests that interact and exchange knowledge for mutual assistance, support, and learning (Hadfield et al., 2006; Kools & Stoll, 2016). Collaborative networking in education is related to different institutions and professionals who have diverse roles and work together in order to achieve their common goals (Azorín et al., 2020). The essential features of networking described by Rincón-Gallardo and Fullan (2016) include, among other aspects: better student learning outcomes; the interchange of effective pedagogy practices; the development of collaborative inquiry; and the growth of interaction and partnerships.

Prior to Covid-19, several special issues were published on networking in education, which shows the interest of academia in this area of knowledge. For example, Azorín & Arnaiz (2018) edited a set of studies on new forms of participation and social transformation implemented in school contexts through networking, based on collected research produced mainly in the Spanish education context (see the journal Profesorado. Revista de Currículum y Formación del Profesorado, volume 22, number 2, for more details). Recently, another double special issue on leading networks placed the focus on the educational leadership practices that support effective networking (Azorín, 2020d), including contributions from Spain, United States, Chile, and the United Kingdom, among others (see the journal School Leadership & Management, volume 40, number 2-3).

This article explores the international literature in which reforms are being implemented to encourage a culture of cooperation and networking among schools. It briefly follows the steps of research from some of the countries that are expanding the existing knowledge of networking in education, and provides some concluding remarks aimed at researchers, policymakers and practitioners interested in making additional contributions to this area of study.

3. Method

The aim of this article is to provide examples from various countries to expand the current knowledge about networking experiences in different education systems. A scoping approach was used to identify relevant and contemporary literature on networking in education worldwide.

The databases reviewed were the Web of Science and Google Scholar, using the following keywords in English and Spanish: "collaborative networking", "school networks" and "professional learning networks". The search was conducted between September and December 2020, followed by a second trawl in April 2021. Whereas the review in this article is focused on the situation that preceded the Covid-19 pandemic, admittedly the use of collaboration networks in education has been significantly boosted in the period since the pandemic began; therefore, this area of knowledge is experiencing extremely fast growth.

The sources selected were chosen after conducting a scan of the specialized literature and a screening process based on the following (temporal and thematic) criteria: age, articles mainly published in the latest decade (when possible); and subject, content relating directly to the research line of collaborative networking in education. A qualitative analysis of the documentary sources selected was undertaken and the

contents were categorized by country. This provided information about networking strategies employed in the different geographical areas reviewed. Research publications that did not specifically focus on collaborative networking in education were excluded.

The article presents a bird's eye view of collaborative networking and educational policies/practices. It encompasses experiences from North American, Latin American, Western Europe, and other countries which are currently beacons in the field. It is not the purpose of this article to make a massive review of the school-to-school networks that are springing up all over the world, but it does seek to raise awareness of ongoing cases, especially those in recent years, and to see how these studies, pieces of research, projects and education policies are contributing to a solid knowledge base that will help the discipline to advance and extend internationally.

4. Results

The findings of the review are presented below, together with their main contributions for the education networking field by geographical areas and countries.

4.1. North America and Latin America

There exists in the United States a diverse set of experiences that demonstrate the development of partnerships among educational and social organizations (Hargreaves et al., 2015; Henig et al., 2016; Kolbe et al., 2015; Wentworth et al., 2017) and others that highlight the importance of professional learning in networked environments (Krutka et al., 2016; Trust et al., 2018). With a focus on improving schools, Berebitsky and Salloum (2017) concluded that support of networks can bolster collective efficacy and foster the improvement of student outcomes. Furthermore, collaborative networks are becoming powerful tools for school improvement and safeguards for exchanges among the various educational and social agents involved in education. There has recently been an increase in the number of networks that comprise not only educational leaders and teachers, but also families that exchange information, practical help, and other resources. The study by Quinn and others (2020) explored families' school-based network participation and how these associations were linked to access of resources and the mobilization of knowledge. Parallel to this, boundary crossing and partnerships between researchers and practitioners are important areas of research, as they place networks as bridges for connecting people that come from each of the two worlds (Hopkins et al., 2019).

In Canada, collaboration between schools has an important place in furthering school improvement and professional learning (Campbell et al., 2017; Fullan & Rincón-Gallardo, 2016; LaPointe-McEwan et al., 2017). For example, Schnellert and others (2018) used a multi-partner approach and created communities of pedagogical inquiry.

Looking to Latin America, Suárez (2015) reflected on the potential offered by collaborative networks in education. Particularly viable are the cases of Colombia, Mexico and Chile, whose governments are leading a series of educational changes oriented at developing networks in their school systems. More than two decades ago, Ochoa and Monroy (1997) debated if networks can help to modernize schooling in Colombia. At that time, Martínez and Unda (1998) addressed the need to undertake an educational reform that would enable the incorporation of innovations and transformations through the use of networking. According to Radinger and others (2018), Colombia needs to encourage networking in schools and strengthen support for leveraging the potential of networks, although the concept of networking is

considered here in a broad sense (Páez, 2020). The work of Martínez (2004) analyzes the place occupied by pedagogical networks in this country, distinguishing between: working tables to address issues on the quality of education; educational research groups; networks and teams; rural school micro-centers; and associations. Elsewhere, Washington and O'Connor (2020) conclude that collaborative professionalism in this particular country have a positive impact on vulnerable children. Sánchez et al. (2014) incorporate knowledge networks linked to the experimentation of new trends in the field of education, and more recently, Pertuz and others (2020) study the collaborative networks among higher education institutions. Lastly, Elacqua and others (2019, 2021) state that the school organization reform of this country is linked to multi-site schools characterized by larger networks, thus confirming that Colombia is following lines of research and practice that are at the forefront of education.

Mexico is currently immersed in a renewal movement in terms of pedagogy and social regeneration. These changes are bringing about unprecedented innovations in education. Authors like Peña-Ayala (2020) and Rincón-Gallardo (2016) argue that the movement generated by educational networking in Mexico is growing. Rincón-Gallardo (2020) recognizes that there is a new paradigm based on educational change as social movement in this specific context. In this country, there is research focused on virtual collaborative networks as an innovative and effective educational practice supported by the platform of technology (Glasserman et al., 2013); experiences in higher education that use networking as a vehicle for improvement and interinstitutional collaboration (Amador, 2010; Ramos et al., 2014; Villalón, 2019); and networking projects for research and for the exchange of teaching proposals that can construct and share knowledge related to educational interventions in classrooms (Ocampo & Peña, 2013). Another line of research that is on the rise in Mexico is the use of educational networks in rural contexts and in disadvantaged areas. For example, the work of López and Saenz-Adames (2010) describe a network alliance, which was created to enhance educational opportunities and connect communities that want to share relevant research, with a school district organization and political support for networking. It is worth noting the Mexican Council for Educational Research (Consejo Mexicano de Investigación Educativa), an excellent repository of information that includes the latest contributions and educational trends occurring in the country.

Finally, the Chilean government is improving the educational system through networking using support and collaboration between schools (Ahumada et al., 2016; González et al., 2017). Today, Chile is fostering systemic change in challenging circumstances, where a strategy based on school improvement and collaborative inquiry is being developed and well documented (Pino-Yancovic et al., 2020).

4.2. Western Europe

Collaborative networks have a significant presence in Europe. This section provides examples of various education systems and how governments are responding to the challenges that arise from networks. This information is very useful for understanding the different emphases that a network policy can have in a variety of contexts.

According to the European Commission (2018), there are at this moment two clear networking approaches: (1) enable, related to networking experiences that are emerging organically at the time that are based on a facilitative strategy, and (2) directive, conducted by policy mandates that are focusing on the system level and generated by an interventionist strategy. Both of them are providing initiatives of

networks in action in different countries around Europe. Below are the strategies of these education systems and the main challenges they face.

For example, in Portugal, Silva and others (2017) informed that there are networking experiences concerning Portuguese schools in disadvantage areas where a culture of isolation among teachers has traditionally prevailed. In the Netherlands and Belgium there are collaborations between schools and other educational and social services, where teacher learning and innovation come from the hand of networking (Binkhorst, 2018; Feys and Devos, 2014; Muijs, 2015b; Van Den Beemt et al., 2018). Another country that is implementing networking in education is Austria (Rauch, 2016), where value is given to the power of networks as channels of communication for the direct sharing of praxis and knowledge. Austrian studies such as Roessler and Westfall-Greiter (2018) show the potential of virtual professional learning networks in system transformation. Germany is another example of good practices in networking in education, where there are experiences which are putting the focus on collaborative initiatives among schools and third-sector organizations (Kolleck, 2016, 2017, 2019; Kolleck et al., 2020).

In Spain, there is an up-to-date corpus of studies, which shows that collaborative networking is emerging in force (Azorín, 2019; Arnaiz et al., 2018). Many Spanish schools and professionals are in a period of transition from isolation towards a model of collaborative networking, and there is a genuine attempt being made to move networking research forward (Azorín, 2021). The first Spanish networking initiatives in education occurred in Catalonia more than a decade ago (Longás et al., 2008). This part of Spain is a pioneer especially with regard to socio-educational networks that point towards networks that are extended beyond the school (Civís & Longás, 2015; Duran et al., 2020; Vilar et al., 2017). In the Andalusian region, Cotrina and others (2017) worked on a project for the development of local collaboration and support networks between schools and social organizations operating within the same geographical area. Hernández and Navarro (2018) analyze the contributions of a school network of nine Andalusian schools. In this experience, leadership teams and teaching staff work together sharing strategies, reflections and activities related to the transition process from one educational stage to another. A recent contribution by Ruiz-Román and others (2019) presents a networking project where various agents (educational, cultural, and social) collaborate to increase equity and to fight exclusion in a disadvantage area of Malaga. Similar to this research, Martínez and others (2018) in the Basque Country incorporate collaborative actions and socioeducational networks to favor the inclusion of vulnerable children. The findings point to the value of an alternative form of action where there are professional, community and policy members involved. Azorín (2020e) and Azorín and Muijs (2017) concluded that Spanish networking policies are shifting towards a new paradigm for the construction of a more open education system where collaborative learning, collective efficacy and community engagement can make a difference.

Lastly, the case of the United Kingdom is one of the best examples of learning from the implementation of policies that encourage networking (Armstrong & Ainscow, 2018; Armstrong et al., 2020; Bennell, 2015; Chapman & Muijs, 2013; Cornelissen et al., 2017; Gilbert, 2017; Hadfield & Ainscow, 2018; Muijs, 2015a; Muijs et al., 2010; O'Leary & Wood, 2019). Support between schools is growing in this country and networks and alliances are constantly being forged. These associations are banking on network collaboration and research in order to be able to share experiences, generate knowledge and respond better to student diversity, among other aims. Recently, Mills

and Hextall (2019) provided a view of the growth of the cooperative school movement in education in England. Clearly, this is very much in line with the "together we are better" approach referred to by Trust and others (2016). Moreover, the curriculum in Wales proposes the development of partnerships/alliances to move knowledge and expertise, facilitating cross-sectoral and multi-agency collaboration to support those in greatest need (Welsh Government, 2017). In this vein, Ainscow (2015) claims that the huge amounts of resources, experiences and knowledge that remain unexplored or are underused in the classrooms, in the education systems and in society as a whole are reasons enough to invest in educational networks. However, not all governments are equally equipped when it comes to fostering school networks; nor do all schools enjoy the same pedagogical autonomy, resource management and hire and fire powers. While the examples presented in this article cannot necessarily be extended or generalized, they serve to promote reflection within the educational and scientific community about what it is possible to do (others have done it), and about the prevalence of networking in schools (Azorín & Muijs, 2018).

4.3. Other countries

In Australia, networking is considered to be a system policy effort (Kamp, 2018). The project developed by Harris and Jones (2017) incorporated the promotion of collaborative practices between schools and focused on the increase of teacher development. In this respect, collaborative research cycles were integrated into the daily life of professionals involved.

In New Zealand, research shows experiences of networking in education in recent years as well. For example, the work of Lai and McNaughton (2018) focuses on school networks that analyze data to develop more effective practices and improve education, particularly reading comprehension. More recently, Dibben (2019) has explored the type of leadership that flourish in school networks, which is one of the top lines of knowledge that is being explored in educational research right now. In summary, the examples contained in this paper show that there is a need for investment, projects, and public policies to spread these practices to other territories and countries, where collaboration is still in its early stages.

5. Conclusion

This final section explains some of the main questions raised within this area of research and some possible scenarios for the future. Current international research into educational networks has led to education policies and practices aimed at fostering networking and collaboration in schools. Although progress has been made, there are still many vague network discussions at the international level (Azorín et al., 2020; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020). The arrival of collaborative networking in education has sparked intense debates about its lights and shadows. This article aspires to be a call for attention in this direction. The penetration of networks in educational scene is a high-speed affair. Seven key aspects related to the current state of play of research are listed below with the intention of shedding light on the issue:

First, an approach based on the power of the community

Networks are based on an approach that emphasizes the importance of the local community. Collaboration can and must come from the various educational and social

agents in schools and nearby institutions in order to respond to needs of a similar nature.

Second, an opportunity to learn from differences and put an end to isolation, individualism, and competitiveness

Networks enable the creation of an interactive organization in which isolation ceases to be a major issue within, between and beyond schools. In contrast, despite the accountability agenda, network organization supposes an education model in which connectivity, collectiveness and collaboration are the main routes of educational change.

Third, an interconnected system (ecosystem)

There is a wide range of possibilities available, from peer support to academy chains, charter school networks, alliances, associations, partnerships, federations, trust, school-to-school collaboration, professional learning networks and other various types of networking organization/interaction. Recent research and trends are converging towards the creation of ecosystems that provide the networks with the necessary space form them to evolve.

Fourth, a strategy for building bridges, crossing boundaries, eliminating borders, and working for a school without walls are among the main priorities to be considered

This is associated with the paradigm of an open school that goes beyond the school gates (Woodland & Mazur, 2019). Most researchers into networks bear in mind the need to build bridges between schools, leadership teams, teachers, students, families, policymakers, university researchers and other agents/stakeholders.

Fifth, an opportunity for more effective management of the resources available to education

In the 21st century, it makes no sense that the resources available to schools remain unused. Sharing materials, research, findings, experiences, innovations, ideas, as well as generating and transferring knowledge are some of the main reasons behind this revolution.

Sixth, a driving force behind change

Hargreaves & O'Connor (2017) promoted reflection about the move towards a paradigm where collaboration goes beyond traditional hierarchies. The school network movement spells the end of the traditional hierarchies that have persisted for decades in the classroom and facilitates an eminently practical strategy with a structure of communication and horizontal exchange.

Seventh, an effective school improvement method

In the main, the countries cited in this article address the issue of school improvement deriving from networking. Some key points underlined are the response to student diversity and student outcomes, smoother transitions between the different educational stages and the world of work, the rise of inclusion, equity, equality, and the potential of networking in rural environments, the possibilities networking affords in challenging urban contexts or disadvantaged areas, and high and low performing schools.

In short, the subject addressed by this article is relevant and timely, as networking is becoming ever more necessary in overcoming today's challenges. The paper provides an overview of the research that is currently being undertaken in education with collaborative networks serving as the motor of change. Obviously, the above means that countries need to develop policies that promote incentives for networking and collaboration in education. However, in the context of Covid-19 political reforms should not be considered as the panacea. On the contrary, it has been demonstrated that the powerful networking practices are appearing without the imposition of policy authorities (Sahlberg, 2020).

In summary, the main contribution of this paper is that it reviews studies conducted in some countries regarded as beacons of collaborative networking in education. One of its limitations is that some regions and countries such as Eastern Europe, France and Italy are not covered. While there are some plausible experiences of networking in education in these areas, the search (in both Spanish and English) yielded a greater number of proposals and initiatives from the countries that feature in the results section. It would be interesting to replicate this work by including these and other countries, periods, themes, and scenarios after the Covid-19 pandemic. This review has mainly collected studies and research projects conducted prior to the pandemic, which still did not reflect the exponential increase that educational system networks worldwide are currently experiencing. Additionally, considering the vast scope of the field and bearing in mind that it would be a titanic endeavor to encompass educational networking initiatives globally, the conclusions are largely exploratory. Hence its limitations, even though it is certainly important to produce research in this area. Future studies should undoubtedly consider the situation caused by the emergence of the pandemic, as noted by Azorín (2020a), where networks are effective mechanisms to address the challenges posed by the new situations. Therefore, the next step in this area of research will be to reproduce these reviews in other settings, particularly after the pandemic has been overcome.

In conclusion, life, as well as educational research, is formed by pathways. However, the journey of collaborative networking in education settings has only just begun. Let us take that journey, contribute to this spread and see what is yet to come.

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