

# The potential of networking for the support of learning

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# Czech Republic – in the heart of Europe



## BRNO

The 2<sup>nd</sup> largest city

# Masaryk University



MUNI

Masaryk University – 2nd largest university in CR (est. 1919)

9 Faculties

32 500 students

Faculty of Arts (est. 1921, 7.000 students)



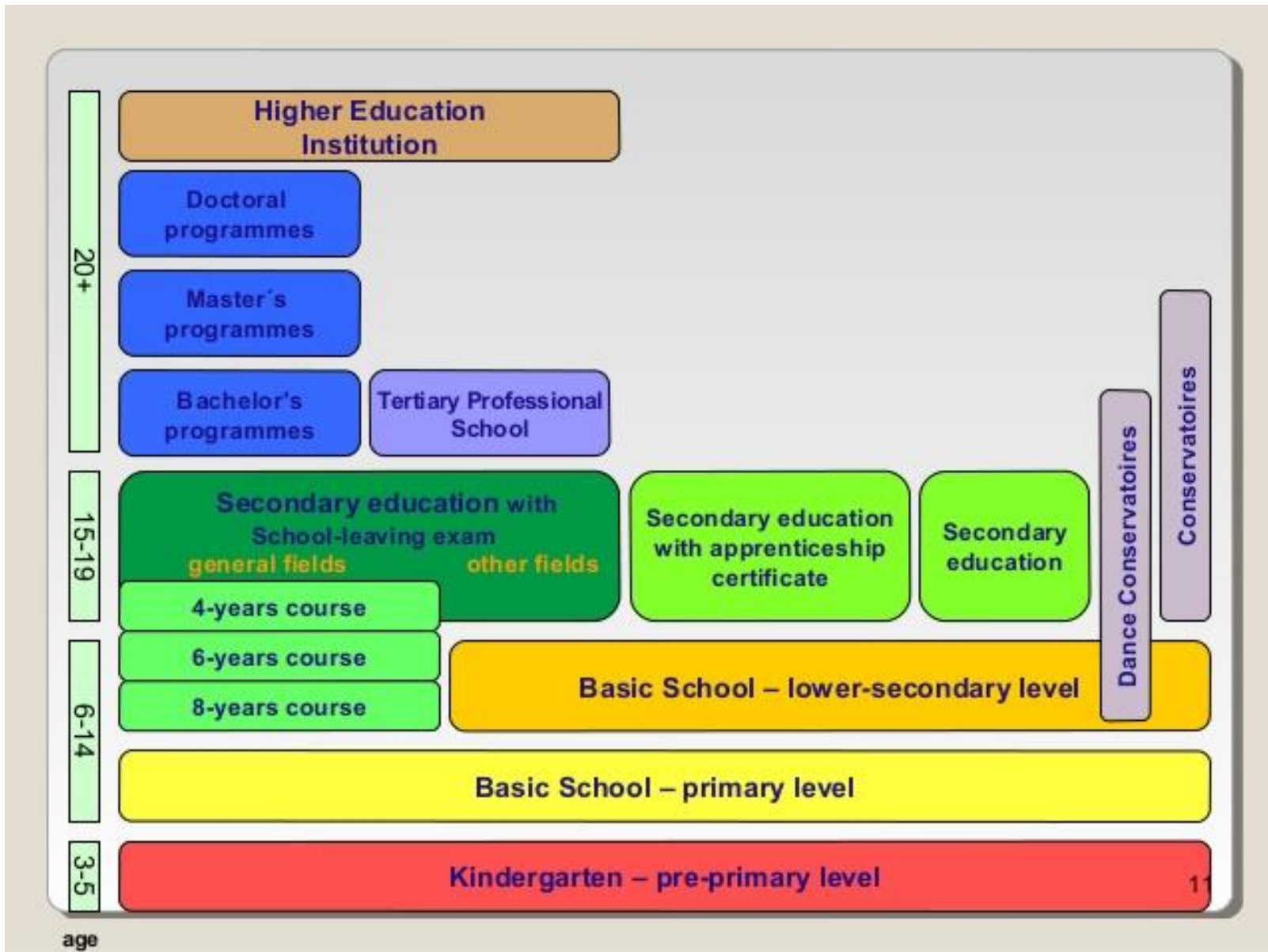
# Czech school system

- Population: 10,5 million
- 1,6 million people 0-14 years of age (15,4 %)
- 327.000 HE students
- GDP per capita 18.160 USD
- Government expenditure on education – 4 % of GDP
- Total government expenditure on education 9,5 %
- Public, private, church schools
- App. 5.000 kindergartens, app. 4.000 elementary/lower secondary schools (ISCED 1 + 2), app. 1.300 upper secondary schools (ISCED 3), 28 public HE institutions, and 43 private HE institutions

## Trends:

- School autonomy
- Inclusive education
- Teaching quality and teacher profesionality
- Accontability
- ...

# Czech school system – structure



# Introduction

- Question of responsibility - no more only individual responsibility for learning in schools
- Shared learning, shared leadership
- How? Networks as a potential mean to develop professionally and increase the expertise at schools  
(Vanblaere & Devos, 2016; Stoll et al., 2006)
- Networks within and also between schools
- But: collective learning in schools still limited
- Research: school leaders can influence whether networks function or not in schools
- This paper: main ideas and trends of school networking, example of a good practice

# Changing society, changing school ?

- Educational context is constantly changing, globalisation and diversity
- This requires teachers to constantly adapt their practices – teaching approaches (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011)
- Teachers often prefer individual learning
- But: schools need to develop towards a learning organisation that provide conditions in which teachers can share and construct knowledge with colleagues and reflect upon their practices

# Challenges in teacher education

- Individual teachers not sufficiently prepared in pre-service training to cope with all challenges
- They feel isolated, lack of self-efficacy to handle diversity problems (Poortman et al., 2018)
- Content of off-site in-service training does not often coincide with teachers' needs
- Teachers sometimes feel lack of support to learn differently
- And yet: Schools should become places for deliberate and systematic professional learning
- Schools organized for learning are usually referred to as having high „adaptive capacity“



# Networks as a potential way forward?

- NET = a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way; operating as a collective enterprise (Toole & Louis, 2002).
- Network can be applied to a wide range of phenomena, internal as well as external, both **social** and **technological** (Jackson & Temperley, 2007)

# Networks as a potential way forward?

- Different definitions, conceptions...
- Professional Learning Network (PLN) as one of them
- PLN as mechanism for knowledge creation, as encouragement of teachers to discuss, question, adjust their own practice, starting from mutually sharing ideas, insights, concrete and practice-oriented didactical approaches...

(Brown, Poortman, 2018)

# Specifically: characteristics of PLN

- Shared values and vision
- Collective responsibility
- Reflective professional inquiry
- Collaboration
- Both group, and individual learning are promoted

(Hord, 2014)



# Networks can differ as for...

- Degree of formality of interactions
- Strength of interactions
- Depth of interactions
- Availability of expertise
- Network steering
- Width of networks
- Material support
- ...

Marz et al., 2018

# Potential impact of PLN

- Reduction of isolation
- Collaborative professional development
- Joint solutions to shared problems
- Exchange of practice and expertise
- Facilitation of knowledge sharing and school improvement
- Opportunities to incorporate external facilitation
- Shared leadership and responsibilities within and between schools (Earl & Katz, 2010)

Professional learning networks aim at **knowledge creation** rather than replication or transfer (OECD, 2003)

# Key factors for the success of PLN

- **Teachers'** motivation to participate in a PLN
- **Teachers'** attitude towards PLN
- **Leadership** practices in the context of PLN (leaders embed these initiatives in their school policy and school structures ...)
- **Leaders'** support



# Preconditions of PLN's development

- Shared objectives and vision
- Shared leadership
- Culture of inquiry
- Supportive relationships and trust

And **focus on improving core educational procedures** as well as **use of participatory processes** inside and outside the PLN

# Focus on school leaders

- For school leaders it is important to deliberately create conditions for collaborative inquiry

Three essential roles for school leaders:

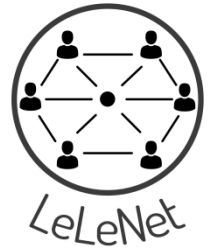
- **The role of ‘culture developer’**
- **The role of ‘educator’**
- **The role of ‘architect’**



# Support of school leaders to manage above mentioned roles

- Research: school leaders work very hard but spend little time on development and support of conditions for collaboration and shared/collective learning in schools
- School leaders need right competencies to initiate, support and make PLN sustainable
- Therefore, our project aims at identifying essential competences for school leaders and translating them to a training module

# LeLeNet Project



- Leading Learning by Networking
- Partners: CZ, ES, BE, SI, SE, UK
- Headteachers' needs in networking (qualitative and quantitative research, theory)
- Aim: to develop and pilot training modules for headteachers based on their needs
- <https://lelenet.net/>

## Headteachers' needs in networking support – a qualitative research

- In February and March 2018 interviews with school leaders in 6 countries were conducted
- Altogether:
  - 4 focus group interviews with 19 heads
  - 10 individual interviews with 10 heads

## School heads' experience and needs in networking support – a qualitative research

We used the pre-agreed interview schedule with the themes as follows:

1. topics for networking;
2. teachers' motivation for networking;
3. the role of school heads in networking;
4. benefits of networking;
5. heads' strategies for supporting and sustaining networks;
6. limits, challenges and head' needs.

## Results: 1. Experience with networking – topics

- ***development of students' special competences***, i.e. crafts (CZ), use of technology in learning and teaching (UK, SI), adapting teaching methods to all students' needs (SE), programmes to strengthen students' responsibility for their own learning (SI);
- ***development of curriculum and teaching methods***, i.e. improvement of formative and summative assessment (SE), development of mastery in maths (UK), “complete reconstruction of inadequately organized teaching” – block teaching (CZ), developing new teaching courses (BE), developing programmes for gifted students (SI);
- ***school leadership development*** – explicitly mentioned by SI, UK and SE partners and implicitly by CZ and BE partners;
- ***supporting school specialization*** reported by CZ, UK and SE partners.

## 2. Teachers' motivation for networking

### Factors of controlled (external) motivation

- **growing need for co-operation in education**, i.e. new trends in school policy, political and developmental trends, such as requirement of inclusive education (CZ), new trends in school policy (UK), “as a response to the growing external influence on schools: of parents, the ministry” (SI);
- **social pressure**: “as more and more of the schools are being pulled in [to some of the powerful networks] all of the time” (UK), a similar issue is reported by CZ partner;
- **self-protection** to meet certain external requirements (UK) or to protect the school against closing down (CZ): “The impulse was threat to teachers, the school became a sinking boat and it had to get mobilized (CZ)”;
- **financial motives** in the case of UK and CZ.

## 2. Teachers' motivation for networking

### Factors of autonomous (internal) motivation

- ***improvement at school and personal level*** is reported by all partners: in most cases it can be understood as it has been initiated by intrinsic motivators, such as developing better opportunities for children (UK), developing stronger professional relationships among teachers (SI), or building self-regulated networks to develop the curriculum for certain groups of pupils (SE);
- ***sharing and developing teaching practice and thus building new knowledge*** in professional dialogue (UK), for “changing generations of children” (SI), “by visiting each other classrooms” (SE);
- ***teachers' self-actualization leading to higher professional confidence*** by developing new skills, by “being aware that they are not alone in the problems” (SI5), by being aware that “collaboration is the only way forward and the core of leadership group” (UK), or by being inspiration for other teachers in and outside their schools (CZ).

### 3. The role of school heads in networking

School leaders should be ***primarily the instructional leader***

The answers are clustered under four categories:

- ***initiator*** by proposing projects, starting the process, having a clear vision about learning in the school, “bringing good examples to school” (CZ);
- ***motivator***: in the case of UK, this type of role is related to coaching culture, in CZ and SI head teacher as a role model is emphasized;
- ***facilitator***, i. e. creating the right conditions and structures both when it comes to networks on external or internal level (SE, CZ, SI), “getting teachers’ to feel ownership and be confident in their shared capacity to improve” (UK);
- ***controller*** (by monitoring), such as being a member of monitoring committee (UK), reporting at meetings, seeing reports (CZ), “constantly being there and evaluating progress” (SI).



## 4. Benefits of networking

### Benefits for teachers

- ***developing professional practice***, such as methodology of work (CZ), “improving quality of teaching by developing appropriate teaching methods” (SI3), developing formative assessment (SE);
- ***sharing knowledge and skills***, i.e. “how to pass on their knowledge and skills while passing on experience and sharing their knowledge in a network of colleagues” (CZ), common problem solving (SI);
- ***developing common professional language*** “when it comes to lesson plans, instructions to the students or teacher interpretation of documents” (SE); “what counts for one teacher also counts for another teacher” (BE);
- ***acting beyond the classroom walls***: “leaving the classroom – teachers visiting colleagues” (SE), “developing creativity by networking among schools” (SI).

# 4. Benefits of networking

## Benefits for students

These benefits are closely related to benefits for teachers especially to development of their professional practice with a more indirect impact on students:

- ***experiencing new teaching approaches***, such as collaborative learning (SI), assessment for learning (SE), adjustments for age (UK), better alignment of teaching methods to assessment (BE);
- ***more motivated teachers – more motivated students*** (“Intrinsic motivation is important for both”) – SI;
- ***using external resources*** (experts) for the benefit of students, i.e. in inclusive education (SE, CZ), specific projects (SI).

## 5. School heads' strategies for supporting and sustaining networks

- ***fostering school culture for networking*** by “sense making and sense giving” (SE), “internal climate of school and school culture for the success of networking” (CZ), “fostering a culture of mutual professional respect” (UK), “being there and encourage” (SI);
- ***being a role model*** by participating in networks (SE), “being there” (SI), “acting as a role model” (BE);
- ***initiating networks***, such as “initiating peer observations” (SI), “building a team at school” (CZ);
- ***sustaining networks*** by monitoring and evaluation (SI), aligning the vision (BE), “systemic quality work” (SE) and “support during a long period” (SE).

## 6. Limits, challenges and the needs of school heads

- ***building the culture of collaboration***, i.e.: BE and SI partners stated that “teachers are not used to co-construct knowledge”, while UK partners pointed to the “need to work on a relationship based on mutual respect”;
- ***head teachers’ knowledge*** in this area is explicitly mentioned by CZ, SI and SE partners; it seems that networking among head teachers could be a significant source of knowledge and experience, also leadership style seems to be very important for networking (SE, SI, CZ, BE);
- ***resources***, i.e. lack of time and space caused by teachers’ overload and/or number of different projects;
- ***teachers’ motivation*** related factors such as lack of trust among teachers (SI), percentage of teachers on short term contracts (SE), understanding the importance and benefits of collaboration (SI, UK, BE), unpleasant past experiences (CZ), etc.;
- ***policy support*** including financial resources (CZ), or “building infrastructure to make sure that they secure in their own school as well as being able to support schools in their alliance (UK)”.

# Next steps

- Quantitative research – questionnaires to find out experience and educational needs of school heads in the field of PLN management (min. 50 respondents of each partner country)
- On the basis of interviews and questionnaires to develop training modules for school heads how to support and sustain PLNs in schools
- Piloting of training modules and dissemination workshops
- We intend to keep up the webpage on which schools heads and trainers could share their experience with PLN – but we assume it is going to be a challenge – language barriers, sustainability of projects...)

## In sum

- To stay with individual responsibility for learning in schools is not enough
- This relates to student learning but also to teacher learning
- There is too much on the stake...
- Networking as a chance to move in an indicated direction...

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