
MOVING TEACHERS TO THE CENTER OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Improvement networks give teachers the opportunity to play a key role in addressing problems within education.

By **Edit Khachatryan and Emma Parkerson**

Although it is not widely known, “in the nineteenth century, the medical profession was generally weak, divided, insecure in its status and its income, unable to control entry into practice or to raise the standards of medical education” (Starr, 1982, p. 7). With the advent of board certification, practitioners defined and measured the quality of medical practice, and the field began to professionalize. Physicians became powerful, prestigious, and wealthy, and they began to shape the organization and financial structure of medicine.

Professions are characterized by skilled practitioner performance that is anchored in the knowledge gleaned from the intersection of theory and practice (Shulman, 2004). Doctors, lawyers, architects, and other professionals have been able to leverage their knowledge of their respective fields to shape their professions (Macdonald, 1995). However, the structure of schooling hasn’t often allowed teachers to participate, as a matter of routine, in solving the complex and persistent problems that characterize their work. To do so, they would need to be given time to collaborate with others in the system to examine the origins, presentation, and experience of the problems they and their students face. Such work requires “a new mindset, the creation of a new infrastructure, and new patterns of authority and power” (Mehta, Gomez, & Bryk, 2012, p. 36). One such intentional structure can be found in networked improvement communities (NICs).



ILLUSTRATION: GETTY IMAGES

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Networked improvement communities

NICs move practitioners from the margins of system improvement to the center by placing them alongside researchers, administrators, and policy makers to solve the seemingly intractable problems of teaching and learning (Bryk et al., 2015). A thriving NIC is a scientific-professional learning community, composed of professionals who form a *learning community* working to come to a greater understanding of how to improve. NICs are *scientific* because they employ disciplined inquiry and measurement to empirically determine how changes they make affect system outcomes (Russell et al., 2019). As a result, they produce *professional* knowledge about what works, for whom, and under what conditions. In an NIC, traditional patterns of authority, power, and structures of schooling are disrupted to create spaces where diverse stakeholders solve shared problems. Because the practitioners themselves determine what high-quality practice looks like, NICs offer an opportunity for a collective re-professionalization of teaching.

The NIC Development Framework (Figure 1) illustrates the key elements required in developing, launching, and operating an NIC (Russell et al., 2019). NICs use improvement science tools to develop a rich understanding of a problem and how to address it. This work of iteratively

testing and using measurement tools to learn from changes is the technical core at the center of framework that feeds the scientific professional learning community. But how does a network, often composed of geographically dispersed individuals and organizations, manage to do this?

To work together, members of an NIC must deliberately structure roles and relationships (e.g., building relational trust) and foster vital norms and identities (e.g., cultivating collective identity). To show what this looks like in practice, we draw on two existing networks: the Network to Transform Teaching (NT3) and the National Writing Project (NWP). We mean these to serve as examples of how teacher agency can be activated to do improvement work, but we do not want to suggest that these are the only models for other potential NICs to follow — there is no one “best” way to organize a networked improvement community.

Structuring network roles and relationships: The NT3

In schools, individuals are often separated from each other because of their differing institutional roles (e.g., teachers and staff) and organizational barriers (e.g., differing schedules and office locations). In an NIC, roles and relationships are intentionally structured to ensure that

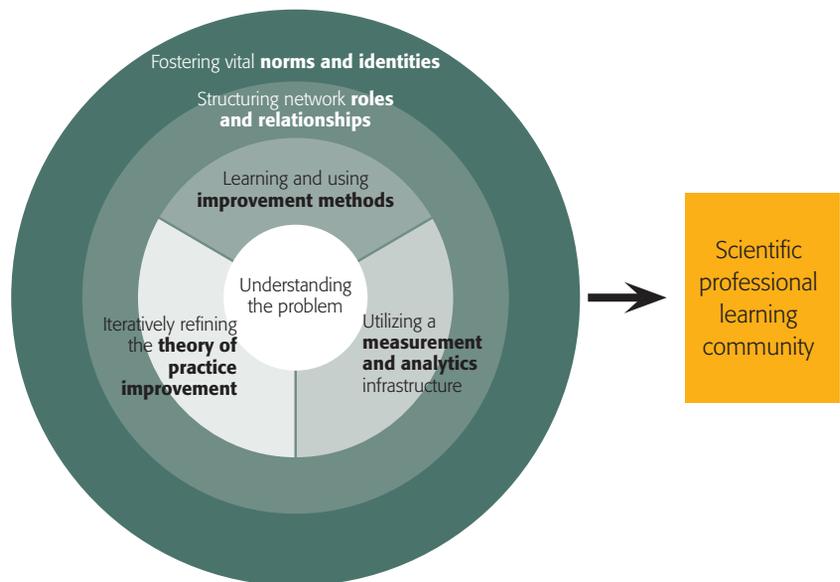
members are able to engage in learning without compromising the scientific discipline at the core of the work. Vibrant, highly engaged NICs structure roles and relationships intentionally through (1) membership frameworks, (2) participation and engagement routines, (3) social connection mechanisms, and (4) relational trust among members.

For example, the Network to Transform Teaching (NT3) excelled in each of these areas. Created in 2013 by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), and active through 2018, NT3 was a networked improvement community made up of more than 100 schools across 10 states. Network members sought to increase the numbers of accomplished, National Board-certified teachers by improving school- and district-based professional learning structures.

Membership frameworks

Because each of us sees only parts of the whole system (Senge, 1990), system improvement requires bringing together

FIGURE 1.
NIC development framework



Source: Russell, J.L., Bryk, A.S., Khachatryan, E., LeMahieu, P., Peurach, D., Zoltners, J., & Hannan, M. (2019, April). *The social structure of networked improvement communities: Cultivating the emergence of a scientific-professional learning community*. American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Toronto, ON, p. 35.

people with different areas of expertise and perspectives. A network's membership should include those with sufficient practical expertise about how the problem is experienced and those with knowledge about research related to the problem and potential ideas for improvement. The aim of NT3 was to ensure that all students are taught by accomplished teachers; therefore, the network brought together accomplished, National Board-certified teachers who were leaders in participating locales and in research. The premise was that Board-certified teachers have advanced professional capital that affords them the ability to lead change in their localities (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). These teachers served as network directors in each participating state, and they in turn identified additional Board-certified teacher leaders to join the network as improvement team facilitators within each district. Network directors convened and coached teams of improvement facilitators across districts in how to apply improvement science tools like cycles of inquiry and measurement, and improvement team facilitators did the same across schools within their district.

The membership framework required each participating school to have an NT3 leadership team made up of two teachers and one administrator who guided the selection and testing of changes within their school. These school-based leadership teams were supported by teachers, administrators, and other school support staff who tested changes and collected data connected to the network's theory of improvement. Before officially joining the network, participating schools demonstrated the ability to meet the criteria laid out in the membership framework, ensuring that NT3 remained an effort led by teachers, for teachers.

Participation and engagement routines

Because our school systems are generally not organized to facilitate this kind of collaboration for school improvement, NIC participation is sometimes considered "above and beyond" members' daily work. During the beginning stages of their NT3 work, it was common for teachers to stay after school to participate. For the work of the NIC to remain a priority, members asked for other ways of participating so that they could stay engaged and face fewer barriers to participation. As a result, NIC leaders began working with schools to set norms for principal-teacher leadership teams, to ensure that change ideas were aligned to strategic priorities, and to leverage pre-existing

meeting structures to advance NIC-related work. For example, instead of creating a new training about Board certification that occurs after school once per month, schools began integrating National Board standards into preexisting school-based learning routines like lesson study.

Besides thinking about participants' schedules, leaders also must design meeting routines, agendas, and other participation structures with an eye to the needs and constraints members in different groups may experience. In particular, they consider how to create conditions that make it easier for teachers to actively participate in the network. In NT3, meetings where teams planned out changes they wanted to try were short, inten-

sive, and in-person so that teacher-administrator teams could be deeply immersed in coplanning and minimize time away from their students. Teachers testing new ideas in their schools were supported by regional improvement facilitators with deeper knowledge of improvement methods and the flexibility to visit schools at times convenient to teachers. These facilitators also observed and offered feedback on dynamics in school-based teams, ensuring that improvement efforts were the result of collaborative decision making among teachers and administrators.

Teachers' work changes throughout the year, and thus the routines must shift to ensure they remain sustainable. NT3 leaders used biannual assessments of the network's health and vitality to monitor how things were going and determine what such changes needed to be made. The first of these assessments revealed that teachers were unable to attend virtual monthly network meetings because they did not have the flexibility during the workday. When they were able to join, they wanted peer-to-peer learning that was immediately applicable to the change they were testing out in their schools. This led to the development of a weekly newsletter that moved one-way information sharing out of monthly meetings so that there was more time for social learning.

Social connections

NICs bring practitioners together from diverse contexts so that they can learn what works, for whom, and under what conditions, and use that information to make improvements locally. Although such diversity is rich for learning, having members in different locations creates challenges for building social connections. In a survey, NT3 members

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said that the most frequent barrier to building connection with members across other sites was finding time to connect.

How a social network is structured influences information flow, the strength of relationships, and communication across a network (Daly, 2010). A denser, more connected network has greater opportunity for communication and connection. As a large, geographically dispersed NIC, the NT3 offered a large number of potential connections, a majority of which were formed through cross-site affinity groups organized around different aspects of NT3's theory of improvement. For instance, a number of school-based instructional coaches focused on integrating professional teaching standards into instructional rounds. These coaches met regularly to discuss testing — specifically, what they are trying in their schools, the resulting data, and their next steps. This cross-site connection offered an opportunity to develop professional knowledge among peers grounded in authentic connections around shared work.

Relational trust

Central to all these elements — membership, engagement, and connection — is trust. Trust is essential because NICs require members to be public with their practice, including their failures. When members are willing to share their failures along the way, everyone learns more, together, and faster. For teachers who have for decades worked in closed-door classrooms, this will represent a major shift, and intentional planning will be needed to help those teachers open up about their practice.

To cultivate a sense of openness and trust, NT3 convenings included time for members to share personal narratives of what brought them to teaching. In these conversations, members shared with others their values and experiences, building connections that went beyond conversations about their day-to-day work and that increased personal regard and respect. The power of shared narrative also helps as NICs develop their norms and identities.

Fostering vital norms and identities: The NWP

Because the culture in which improvement work happens is an important factor in a group's success, NICs work to

foster norms and identities that are consistent with those of scientific professional learning communities and that keep teachers at the center of improvement. Fostering a network culture is a complex task, and it takes time for members to develop new visions of their own practice and identities as professionals and co-owners of an improvement community.

This work, which is neither technical nor straightforward, includes cultivating (1) a collective network identity, (2) a shared narrative of network participation, and (3) an evidence-based culture. The National Writing Project (NWP) exemplifies one approach to fostering a network's norms and identities. NWP has been able to achieve this largely because of its willingness to invite members to add to, shape, and even modify what it means to be a member.

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Collective identity

To foster norms consistent with a learning community, network members adopt a collective identity as a group that accepts responsibility for improvement. That is, members begin to see their engagement in network activities as both contributing to the collective and benefiting themselves. Given the often-siloed nature of teachers' work, this may require teachers to undergo some identity and motivational shifts (such as from *I* to *we*). They might initially join the network because they think it will help them with their own core work (e.g., instruction), but their participation brings them to the realization that they can also help produce professional knowledge for and with the group.

NWP serves as the longest and most successful example of a thriving network that has prioritized building, attending to, and maintaining a collective “we” perspective. A national summer institute provides an intensive opportunity for select teachers to learn about writing and leadership, and over the school year, NWP teachers across the country facilitate learning for colleagues at their local sites. It has been subject of multiple studies on writing and teacher leadership (e.g., Lieberman & Wood, 2003). Over the years, members of NWP, regardless of their subject area or grade, have come to hold a collective identity as teachers of writing; they maintain an intellectual commitment against assigning the teaching of writing to any one subject area or grade. In their joint work, network members write, share writing and their approach to writing, share stories of how they teach writing, and wrestle

as a community to collectively own knowledge together. Whether they are newcomers or veteran members, NWP teachers become a community of critical friends who make themselves vulnerable by sharing their own writing and how they teach writing.

NWP members maintain a rich tradition of taking responsibility to engage and lead, and to receive and pass on knowledge. In the classic NWP summer intensive, experienced facilitators lead workshops, invite members for demonstrations, and model how to give and receive feedback. This process capitalizes on the leadership and expertise of existing members and models for new members how the community operates (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Across state lines, NWP members participate in similar intentionally constructed activities, and their collective professional identity is evident in how they describe themselves as writers, teachers, humans, and improvers.

Shared narrative

Networks benefit from developing a narrative about why individuals are involved in the network, what the network is trying to accomplish, and the urgency of the problem the group is seeking to address. The crafting, refining, and telling of this shared narrative is necessary for helping members to see themselves as part of a group with a shared mission and to develop personal identities that connect them to the network's work.

At local NWP sites, members share stories with each other, with new members, and with nonmembers about who they are and what they do as part of the NWP. It is common for NWP members to tell and retell the narrative of how the NWP came to be and how they each belong in that history. Members also tell stories of their personal transformation as writers, educators, and humans, often highlighting specific transformational moments. They also tell stories of how their personal transformation and the changes they implemented as a result affected the children that they teach. This act of telling and retelling enables network members to shape *and reshape* a shared narrative around purpose, identity, and joint work.

There is no straightforward way to build a network narrative. It develops over time through activities members engage in, activities that enable members to tell stories about their own reasons for engaging, about the group's collective vision for accomplishing its aims, and about the urgency of the work. Marshal Ganz (2011) refers to these narratives as the story of self, the story of us, and the story of now. At NWP, existing members might tell these stories to new members at formal orientation meetings, and they might be folded into structured activities during institutes or informal social gatherings.

Evidence-based culture

At the heart of an NIC's work is working toward a shared aim, which involves engaging in joint inquiry cycles. Active engagement in inquiry cycles and the documentation of lessons learned through these cycles enable members to build an evidence-based culture. Developing this kind of culture takes consistent practice and transparency. We might see members looking to existing research to inform their work, documenting small changes and their results so their learning can guide others, discussing the value of data and evidence with colleagues, and growing in their commitment to testing their practices and building on others' improvement work. In networks with an evidence-based culture, members constantly ask: *What are we trying to accomplish? What changes can we make that will lead to improvement and why? How will we know a change is an improvement?*



"You'll be fine, but Billy Sloan needs to have his teeth straightened."

While the NWP is 45 years old, it continues to work on strengthening its organizational culture. One of the key components of the NWP model is its regular gatherings of teachers in which members offer a public demonstration of practice. This includes sharing not only their writing curriculum and student products, but talking through the practice, teaching each other about how to really read a piece of student writing, and engaging in inquiry groups. NWP has built a culture in which members ask questions about their own and others' practice, collect different forms of data, and seek alternative perspectives. These practices are all necessary for a thriving NIC with an evidence-based culture.

Leveraging teachers' expertise

Engagement within networked improvement communities enables teachers to move from the periphery of educational improvement to the center. The scientific and collaborative approach to addressing educational problems within NICs disrupts traditional patterns of authority, power, and structures of schooling. In addition, it helps teachers to take ownership of the professional knowledge within the field. Establishing such a scientific-professional learning community requires new ways of thinking and working (Mehta, Gomez, & Bryk, 2012). By design, NICs promote the creation of new mind-sets, structures, and patterns so that teachers, together with researchers, administrators, and policy makers, may solve persistent, complex problems of teaching and learning.

The work of the Network to Transform Teaching and the National Writing Project shows how NICs support the professionalization of teachers. The organizations that initiated both networks already had a predisposition to see teachers as professionals, yet they had to intentionally cultivate routines and methods that enabled members to see themselves as expert problem solvers. Using the NIC approach authentically engages those living with educational problems in generating solutions, testing them, learning from them, and sharing solutions widely. It combines what we know about data- and evidence-driven decision making with what we know about collaborative professional learning. As practitioners and researchers, we have personally seen how engagement within NICs breaks down the isolation of

teaching and lack of collegiality that have often been typical in the profession and leverages the power of teacher leadership to address educational challenges. ■

The scientific and collaborative approach to addressing educational problems within NICs disrupts traditional patterns of authority, power, and structures of schooling.

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