

# How Networking Can Support DEIS Schools

The case for widespread introduction of DEIS school networks

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Drawing on PhD research on the PLUS and Oscailt networks of DEIS schools, this article outlines the importance of networking as a practice for DEIS schools, and highlights the opportunity provided by the DEIS expansion in 2022 to consider the widespread introduction of DEIS school networks in Ireland.

## Introduction

In March 2022, the DEIS programme was expanded to include 322 additional schools. Drawing on recent PhD research on two networks of DEIS schools (Bourke, 2022) – the first piece of research nationally on the topic – this article reflects on the opportunity created by the DEIS expansion for widespread introduction of DEIS school networks.

Findings about the PLUS and Oscailt networks, which are facilitated by the Transforming Education through Dialogue (TED) project at Mary Immaculate College (MIC), illustrate the potential of school networks to support the professional learning, growth, and development of teachers and school leaders, and their capacity to support DEIS schools collectively.

Internationally, networking and collaboration have become prolific in education over the last two decades, with the widespread introduction of professional learning communities (PLCs), professional learning networks (PLNs), and communities of practice (CoPs). In Ireland, we saw the introduction of the School Excellence Fund Clusters (2017), with a specific strand for DEIS schools, and recognition by the Teaching Council's Cosán framework (2016) and Leadership in Our Schools (2016) documents that school networking can enhance teacher professional learning and development.

So what are school networks, and how do they differ from other forms of collaboration? In networks, members come together voluntarily for a shared purpose or activity (Church et al., 2002). Networks do not always encompass learning as explicitly expressed in the title of PLCs or PLNs, or to deepen practice as in CoPs. They may function purely to create connections with those in other organisations for a shared purpose.



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The definition of networks that resonated most with PLUS and Oscailt recognises that collaboration provides opportunities for joint problem-solving:

*A network . . . is a group of organisations working together to solve problems or issues of mutual concern that are too large for any one organisation to handle on its own (Mandell, 1999). Applied to school, the idea of networks suggests that schools working together in a collaborative effort would be more effective in enhancing organisational capacity and improving student learning than individual schools working on their own. (Wohlstetter et al., 2003, cited in Chapman & Hadfield, 2010, p.310)*

### The PLUS and Oscailt networks

PLUS and Oscailt are two of the longest-serving networks of DEIS schools in Ireland. They emerged organically in response to needs identified by schools in Limerick city in 1998 and 2009, respectively.

PLUS comprises 14 DEIS band 1 schools and two special schools in Limerick city and county. Home school community liaison coordinators (HSCLs) primarily represent their school on the network, which meets six times a year. Meetings centre on topics relevant to DEIS schools, guest speakers, sharing of practice, and organisation of MIC initiatives, such as the annual League of Legends soccer tournament.

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Oscailt is a network of 12 DEIS band 1 schools and four DEIS post-primary schools in Limerick city. It was established in 2009 by the Department of Education and TED to support the rollout of a Dormant Accounts initiative to maximise the use of schools for the wider community. When funding ceased, the principals decided to continue meeting, and it has evolved as a principal support network. Oscailt meets six times a year to discuss issues pertinent to the DEIS principal role and DEIS schools, for guest speakers, and to share practice. Both networks have also advocated on behalf of DEIS schools over the years.

### Research approach

Data was gathered for case study research through focus groups, interviews, surveys, and documentary analysis (Stake, 1995). A conceptual framework to understand the networks was informed by policy, practice, and theory. This encompassed influential policy developments and drew on school network literature to establish the practice base and key elements in the analysis of school networks.

Social capital theory and communities of practice were adopted as theoretical lenses to understand how learning occurs and how the networks

operate at individual and collective level. The framework also draws on Bourdieu's theory on economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1997) to highlight social class and other differentials in educational outcomes, and to address the perpetuation of inequality in education through social reproduction and the ideology of meritocracy.

### Key findings

Firstly, the networks enhance members' social capital. As members share experience and insight in this 'safe space', bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000) is developed which fosters solidarity, cohesion, shared purpose, and shared vision to pursue collective goals. Bridging social capital (ibid.) enables members to connect with multiple external stakeholders to access information, expertise, and resources for their schools, and to advocate and raise awareness about the concerns of DEIS schools locally and nationally.

In doing so, the priorities and concerns of network members from DEIS schools become linked to those of stakeholders in other organisations through 'double-loop learning' (Kools and Stoll, 2016, p.21). Connections are made both vertically and laterally through linking social capital (Grootaert et al., 2004), which can facilitate communication between those at different levels of the system, that is, between those on the ground in DEIS schools and those in government departments.

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The networks are also communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) that enhance members' learning, professional development, and leadership skills. Bonding social capital is fostered through peer interaction, reciprocity, and the development of trusting relationships. The 'safe space' and 'mini-culture' (ibid., p.39) of the networks or CoPs provide the foundation for individual benefits of networking, as experienced by research participants.

These include access to the information relevant to their roles and DEIS schools, experience and knowledge of others working in similar contexts, supporting individual wellbeing of staff in DEIS schools, supporting professional learning and the formation of their professional identity, a sense of self-efficacy, and the capacity to fulfil their roles. These are important given the inequalities experienced by children and families in DEIS schools, and hence the challenges faced by principals, HSCLs, and other school staff.

Additionally, the networks were found to support key policy areas for schools, including the Wellbeing Framework (Government of Ireland, 2019), DEIS plans (DoE, 2017b), and School Self-Evaluation (DoE, 2012; DoE Inspectorate 2016a, 2016b). The research also explored the challenges of networking as experienced by participants, and the limitations of these particular networks.

## Why networks of DEIS schools are important

Despite the additional funding for DEIS schools, research shows the persistent nature of educational inequality in outcomes for students, in terms of socio-economic differentials such as class and ethnicity (Drudy & Lynch, 1993; Smyth & McCoy, 2009; Smyth et al., 2015; Smyth 2018a; Smyth 2018b) and disparities between those attending DEIS and non-DEIS schools (DoE, 2017a; Gilleece et al., 2020). Such evidence indicates that certain cohorts in Ireland are still at far greater risk than others of not achieving their potential (Smyth & McCoy, 2009; Frawley, 2014; Fleming & Hartford, 2021). It also shows the need for early intervention (McNamara et al., 2020).

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School networks are important in a context where educational policy views 'educational disadvantage' as an isolated, school-based issue for teachers to deal with, rather than as a wider societal concern that recognises the endemic nature and intersectionality of inequality, which requires a whole-of-government response to social exclusion (Cahill, 2015; Fleming & Hartford 2021; Jeffers & Lillis, 2021).

Not only were PLUS and OSCAILT found to enhance members' professional learning, they have also played an important role in supporting schools and individual members to challenge the 'doxas' of their professional trade (Lynch, 2019, p.530), to respond to and advocate for children and families who experience daily the impact of intractable social and economic inequality, in the absence of a joined-up government response to educational inequality.

## Conclusion

The pandemic brought about monumental changes that have profoundly impacted on society and our education system. Less affluent, more vulnerable and marginalised groups will suffer greater long-term consequences, such as the impact on children's learning, mental health, and wellbeing that are only now starting to be understood by teachers and principals.

We know that the profile of children and young people in DEIS schools differs markedly from non-DEIS schools (Smyth et al., 2015). DEIS schools need support from each other and from educational stakeholders. As the research described in this article shows, school networks can be a powerful mechanism to provide support in the absence of a joined-up government strategy on educational inequality, and to advocate for such a strategy.

The expansion of the DEIS programme in 2022 provides a unique opportunity to reflect on the benefits of school networks, as expressed by the PLUS and OSCAILT members, and to consider widespread introduction of networks for DEIS schools.

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