

## The dark side of networks: and the implications for school leadership

Andy Hargreaves

To cite this article: Andy Hargreaves (2025) The dark side of networks: and the implications for school leadership, School Leadership & Management, 45:1, 1-6, DOI: 10.1080/13632434.2025.2454157

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2025.2454157>



Published online: 31 Jan 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 335



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## The dark side of networks: and the implications for school leadership

'Everybody has a dark side', sang Kelly Clarkson (2012). Should we love hers, she wondered? Should we love anyone's, we might add? But when James Carr (1966) sang 'The Dark End of the Street', he was confessing how lovers were 'living in darkness' to hide their wrong! There was not much to love about that. Perhaps there are some dark sides of other things we shouldn't really be embracing either. Then again, one spoken lyric in Pink Floyd's (1973) classic 'The Dark Side of the Moon', pointed to the fact that there is no dark side of the moon at all. It's just the side we can't see. So, when we see the dark side of someone or something, we may just be imagining it. Instead of a dark side, there's just an overlooked aspect, or perspective that is worth a closer look.

If we wonder about the dark side of networks, or of anything, for that matter, are we looking at something sinister and shady that we should avoid, something intriguing and mysterious that we might come to love and embrace, or perhaps something that isn't really a dark side at all when we inspect it more closely.

This editorial points to three ways of thinking about networks and their actual or apparent dark sides, in education, and in general. It draws on my experiences of building, evaluating, and participating in multiple improvement, innovation, and professional learning networks.

If you think I am writing about you, I probably am. I have seen the dark side of many networks. At one time or another, I've also found myself on the dark side too. I am not exempt from much of what is being described here. Neither are most of us.

Networks in education are enjoying a surge in popularity due to a convergence of several forces and insights.

- *Rapidly changing systems* facing repeated crises such as wars, pandemics, and climate change events, are impossible to control and manage using the conventional policy methods of top-down bureaucracies.
- Traditional *policy implementation* methods have a glaring failure rate that exceeds 80% because of the widespread inability to involve educators collaboratively in the processes of policy creation and interpretation (Viennet and Pont 2017).
- *Virtual conferencing* and meetings necessitated by the COVID-pandemic have multiplied opportunities for educators to collaborate online in ways that don't now require expensive and time-consuming in-person interactions that were a prohibitive factor affecting traditional networks and their sustainability in the past.
- The growing influence and impact of 'evidence-based' educational practices such as explicit teaching and the science of reading call for *new mechanisms of diffusion* for them to be adopted successfully on a large scale.
- A global crisis of teacher recruitment and retention is indicative of a *crisis of motivation in the teaching profession* including school leadership. Networks of innovation

and professional learning offer opportunities for increasing teachers' engagement with their professional work (Hargreaves and Jones 2024; United Nations Labor Organization 2024)

As the popularity of professional and school networks grows, now's the right time to take a pause and become more discerning about when and how networks might have a positive impact on teacher motivation, school improvement and policy implementation, and when and how ill-judged network purposes and designs might be distracting and even damaging in relation to positive educational change efforts. This is why we need to consider the actual and potential dark sides of networks, not to discredit networks, but to make them as strong and defensible as they can be.

When we start up something new like a network or an innovative group of any kind there is understandable excitement about feeling that we are in the vanguard of change, taking some risks, and breaking new ground. But when someone forms a vanguard, there's always a danger that other, more cautious colleagues, may feel that they are being left behind in the guard's van or caboose, at the back of the train. This phenomenon where networks draw some people forward too quickly and leave other people bringing up the rear directs attention to three dark sides of networks that can affect and afflict all of them – *envy*, *exclusion*, and *effervescence*. These 3 Es of network design have dark sides that can be sinister, or revealing, or not even dark sides at all.

## Envy

Do something different, strive for the right thing and the greater good, and you will make enemies, whether you want them or not. In a poem that UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher loved to quote, The Scottish writer, Charles MacKay (2009), asked 'You have no enemies, you say?' 'Well then', he continues, 'You've never turned the wrong to right. You've been a coward in the fight'.

You can't teach or lead from a position of hesitancy or fear. But don't get carried away by your own boldness either. Don't succumb to hubris, or the feeling that you and your innovative group are chosen or special. The people behind you who have not yet joined the network might come across as backward to you, as if they are holding the network and its innovations back. But if you ignore what they think and have to offer, you will create exclusion and foment opposition.

The psychotherapist and Holocaust survivor, Isca Salzberger-Wittenberg, who passed away at 100 years old, in 2023, warned teachers who were outrageously innovative, or who were especially loved by their pupils, against the egotistical urge to attract envy from their peers (Salzberger-Wittenberg, Henry, and Osborne 1983). When you are on the innovative edge, there is seductive tendency to want to be envied, to enjoy being misunderstood and derided by seemingly less imaginative colleagues, and to revel in being a rebel. So, if you're going out on a limb to do the right thing, don't go attracting enemies out of your own psychiatric needs to be adored by your followers and envied by your rivals. Try not to enjoy the limelight too obviously and too much. Show an interest in what your other, less extrovert colleagues are doing. Value their differences from you. Celebrate their accomplishments as well as your own. Expect envy, but don't encourage it. You'll have enemies enough. There's no need to go looking for them.

In the 1970s, the foundational educational change writer, Seymour Sarason (1972), pointed out a tendency among members associated with innovations to

attract accusations of arrogance and superiority. There was a ubiquitous challenge, he warned, of needing to manage foreign relations with jealous peers. He was writing about establishing any new kind of innovative organisation, but his insights apply to networks too.

So, try and show a bit of genuine humility. Take an interest in the practices of colleagues who may teach or lead in different ways from what the network seems to advocate. You might learn something from them. Try and bring other colleagues to meetings you are attending in fancy hotels or exotic locations, so they don't resent you living the high life while they are left behind to deal with everyday drudgery. Better still, try and locate network meetings in low-cost, low-key places that don't arouse jealousy or resentment. When you're back in school, offer to cover some colleagues' classes, give them a break, and get to know their students. Show that your network status doesn't elevate you above the ordinary life that everyone else is having to manage.

### **Exclusion**

All inclusion necessitates exclusion - by definition. When there are insiders, there will also, unavoidably, be outsiders. In schools, not everybody can be involved in everything all the time. Everybody will always be left out of something. This is fine, so long as everyone understands the situation. But if networks are managed badly, pushback from those who have been excluded and who feel disvalued and even slighted, can destroy efforts to spread what is being learned within and beyond the network. It might even destroy the network itself.

There will always be some people who are left out of new networks. What careful network design can do is prevent those who are being left out administratively from also feeling left out emotionally. In 2022, when the eight faculty members in our University of Ottawa team started designing a network of 41 schools across seven Canadian provinces that would develop innovations to support vulnerable and marginalised children after COVID-19, we had to think hard about how to manage the rapid recruitment process (Hargreaves, Ayson, and Karunaweera 2024).

If we relied only on an open call for volunteers, we would fall into the common trap of seeing the same schools that were already involved in other networks and innovations, applying to join our own. Networks tend to attract people who are already professionally entrepreneurial in being on the lookout for more resources and new experiences, and who are already well networked and 'in the know' about emerging opportunities.

But if we used our own research and policy networks to invite schools that we thought might benefit and grow from joining a network they might not have applied for on their own initiative, then we and they risked accusations of inequity and favouritism. And if we relied on senior system leaders in districts and provinces whom we had invited to be associated with the network to nominate possible schools, then there was a danger that we would tend to attract schools that were compliant with system policies and directions rather than ones that were sometimes and somewhat critical of system directions too. The teachers in one of our network schools told us that they really valued being able to apply to join a network directly without having to go through their system leaders or their principal.

When we looked at all these dark sides, we decided to employ all three recruitment strategies and try and effect a balance between them. We used a rigorous review process involving multiple reviewers to make judgments about each school application. We provided active support to schools that were traditionally less experienced in network terms (these were often in relatively isolated rural locations, far away from the centres of

government power and control) but whose minoritized students might especially benefit from network participation. We also communicated to the schools in very clear terms why and how we were making decisions about inclusion so that no-one would feel favoured or special compared to the schools that weren't selected.

Once networks are up and running, there are many other strategies to reduce the likelihood of feelings of exclusion. These can include making participation a progressive rather than one-time process with successive cohorts of increasing involvement; regularly presenting network findings and updates at conferences and meetings in the system; retaining involvement and showing interest in other system improvement activities; and doing everything possible to avoid coming across as superior to people and schools who are not yet involved in the network. The important insight is that exclusion can't be eliminated. It must be managed.

### **Effervescence**

Networks tend to attract certain kinds of people. Not surprisingly, they are people who enjoy networking. Networkers are drawn to meeting new people, exploring different ideas, engaging in fun activities, then sharing and even over-sharing aspects of their work and their lives. Great networking for these kinds of people is often like professional karaoke – performing, joining in, talking out loud, and facilitating a group experience that is totally in the moment.

Networkers like these are not like that large slice of shy and restrained humanity that Susan Cain (2013) writes about in her book, *Quiet*. They love icebreakers, give serious thought to stylish design in the appearance of their workshop materials (and sometimes also themselves), and are drawn to fast, snappy, fun activities that get people engaged and yield quick insights. The Dutch management theorist, Manuel Kets de Vries (2006), writes that in terms of psychiatric types, strong networkers in the middle of organisations or systems are what he calls 'dramatics'. They can get people energised, they exude positivity and a can-do mentality, and they put their charm and enthusiasm to work to get 'buy-in' from everyone else.

What many great network leaders can achieve is what the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1995), called *collective effervescence* – a sort of pervasive sense of energising bubblyness, like soda pop that is about to burst out of its bottle. Collective effervescence is expressed as shared excitement that bonds the group together in a common, uplifting feeling, as in some kinds of religious experience. Positivity, commitment, bonding, and inspiration can all result from collective effervescence. They are powerful and important attributes of network leadership. But there are downsides to these uplifting moments and processes too.

Everything can become too superficial and go too quickly. The fun and fast activities can take on a life of their own rather than being coherently and transparently connected to the deeper purposes that the network is meant to achieve. This is when quiet and more sceptical participants can question what the point of network gatherings is that take them away from serious work with their students. Worse still, the performative parts of networks can disguise and draw attention from ulterior educational purposes and motives that are the very opposite of professional depth and inclusiveness.

In an edited book on the emotions of teaching, Australian authors Brad Gobby and George Variyan discuss a teacher's case study of feeling micromanaged, not by stultifying bureaucracies, but by another form of top-down professional learning that is the apparent the opposite of this – slick, swift, and data-driven (Gobby and Variyan in

press). This example of professional learning was called, fittingly enough, *The Sprint Model*, invented at Google, and drawn from the IT sector (Knapp, Zeratsky, and Kowitz 2016). ‘You have a scrum every week where you re-evaluate and reassess ... using data’, the teacher said. She described it as leaders getting teachers to spend 30 minutes on one thing, 15 minutes on another, 10 minutes after that, ‘then for the next 5 minutes after that, we’re going ... ..’ The end goal, however, was not to be collaboratively innovative and creative, but to implement the government’s top-down programme in explicit teaching of literacy. ‘It was incredible micromanagement of an hour and a half’, she concluded. This model of scrums and sprints, the teacher pointed out, was not typical or representative of the original IT design (Sutherland and Sutherland 2014) from which it was drawn that had much more rigour and focus. In the way it was implemented, it didn’t ‘let people be professionals’ and was ‘a form of mental torture’.

When we evaluated a UK school improvement network, Dennis Shirley and I referred to how this kind of collective effervescence could result in becoming data-driven to distraction (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009). Interacting and networking turn into performative acts that are manifested in short bursts of upbeat emotionality or what Jake Halberstam (2011) terms *toxic positivity*. These bursts or outbursts, even, accompany scenarios that are ultimately top-down, restrictive, and oppressive. Implementation is camouflaged as innovation; compliance is presented as commitment. Professional belonging becomes little more than institutionally ‘fitting in’ with the system’s requirements.


## Conclusion

Whether it’s the wheel, the printing press, or the smartphone, every technology has a downside. Networks are a technology too – a technology for interacting, bonding, learning, circulating ideas, and solidifying a sense of common purpose. They often can and do have immense benefits for improvement, innovation, professional learning, and knowledge circulation. But like all other technologies, they have dark sides too. If we’re developing or participating in a network, deeper knowledge of its dark sides will help us to avoid rushing headlong in the wrong educational direction or towards eventual professional disappointment. If organic networks all go wrong because we never saw or even looked for the problems that were coming, we’ll be thrown back into the grinding gears of mechanical bureaucracies before we know it. So, let’s look at the dark side, learn to live with it and, if we can, even to love it a little.

## References

- Cain, S. 2013. *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking*. New York, NY: Crown.
- Carr, J. 1966. “*Dark End of the Street*.” Written by Penn, D, and Moman, C., performed by James Carr, Goldwax Records.
- Clarkson, K. 2012. *Dark side*. Written by Busbee, M.J.R and Geringas, A., performed by Kelly Clarkson, RCA Records.
- Durkheim, É, 1858-1917. 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press.
- Gobby, B., and G. Variyan. in press. “Feeling Restricted.” In *Teachers’ Emotional Experiences: Towards a new Emotional Discourse*, edited by S. Karnovsky, and N. Kelly. London.: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Halberstam, J. 2011. *The Queer art of Failure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hargreaves, A., G. Ayson, and S. Karunaweera. 2024. “The Power of Play.” *Educational Leadership* 82 (24): 55–59.
- Hargreaves, A., and C. Jones. 2024. “Leading Innovators: How Leaders Can Respond to the Global Crisis in the Teaching Profession.” *Australian Educational Leader* 46 (2): 8–14.
- Hargreaves, A., and D. Shirley. 2009. *The Fourth way*. Thousand Oaks: CA. Corwin Press.

- Kets de Vries, M. 2006. *The Leader on the Couch: A Clinical Approach to Changing People and Organizations*. San Francisco, CA: Wiley.
- Knapp, J., J. Zeratsky, and B. Kowitz. 2016. *Sprint: How to Solve big Problems and Test new Ideas in Just Five Days*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Mackay, C. 1814-1889. *No Enemies*, published and reprinted in MacKay, C (2009). *Selected poems and songs*. Charleston, SC: Bibliobazaar.
- Pink Floyd. 1973. *Dark Side of the Moon*. Los Angeles, CA: Capitol Records.
- Salzberger-Wittenberg, I., G. Henry, and E. Osborne. 1983. *The Emotional Experience of Learning and Teaching*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Sarason, S. B. 1972. *The Creation of Settings and the Future Societies*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Sutherland, J., and J. J. Sutherland. 2014. *Scrum: The art of Doing Twice the Work in Half the Time*. New York: NY. Crown Publishing.
- United Nations/International Labour Organization. 2024, February 24. *United Nation's Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession: Recommendations and Summary of Deliberations*. [https://www.ilo.org/global/industries-and-sectors/education/WCMS\\_912921/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/industries-and-sectors/education/WCMS_912921/lang-en/index.htm).
- Viennet, R., and B. Pont. 2017. *Education Policy Implementation: A Literature Review and Proposed Framework*. OECD Education Working Papers, 162. doi:10.1787/fc467a64-en

Andy Hargreaves  
Boston College and the University of Ottawa  
 andrew.hargreaves@bc.edu