

Systemwide Reform Under Pressure: A Global Perspective on Learning and Change

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In their exploration of the most improved school systems internationally that have continued improving, Mourshed et al (2010, p.80), somewhat naively, admit that in formulating their research hypothesis they did not anticipate the critical role of the 'mediating layer', the "integrator and mediator between the classrooms and the centre" or, to use a computer analogy, "the operating system acting as a conduit and interpreter between the user interface and the central processing unit". This middle tier between national or state policy and the school is fundamental to quality improvement but, as the articles in this collection highlight, exist in a fast changing context still driven by some longstanding ideologies and practices.

In framing my reflections, I have looked across the five articles, pulling out a number of themes from the perspective of my interest in capacity for learning. This interest stems from involvement over many years in research and development in school improvement and its leadership, and the conclusion that real and meaningful educational change requires much more than superficial tinkering with structures and practices in schools and districts. My own work is underpinned by social and organizational learning theories, and I welcome the diversity of theoretical and methodological perspectives taken by the authors in helping to view the special issue topic from different angles.

My starting point is that sustainable changes depend on an ongoing process of learning by individuals, singly and collectively, and by organizations and networks (Stoll, 2009) and in connecting up the different communities of learning (Stoll, 2010). Capacity has the power to help or hinder change and development. I view it as a quality of people, organizations or systems that allows them routinely to learn from the world around them and apply their learning to new situations so that they continue on a path toward their goals, in an ever-changing context. In this way, it also helps them continuously to improve learning and progress at all levels, particularly that of students, the collective and ultimate purpose for such efforts. I am interested in what the articles might tell me about the potential for developing capacity through the models, structures and accountability measures. My comments draw heavily from my own context, England where, I would argue, a policy "experiment is taking place with significant implications for the mediating tier, although I also refer to other countries' approaches and experiences.

Diversity and developing capacity

Districts are under pressure, as this collection's title suggests. Marsh and colleagues' and Wohlstetter and Smith's articles focus on the widening role of other players and forms of governance in the middle tier. For many years districts were the main game in town, but increasingly others are encroaching on

or have taken over their territory. New Zealand, with its highly devolved and self-managing school system since 1989, has few intermediate layers between the central decision makers and individual schools, with ramifications for a lack of shared responsibility and ongoing development of capability and useful resources (Wylie and Stout, 2011). Meanwhile, in England the role of local authorities is shifting and in many ways fragile. The scale and speed of change in England is dramatic. Greater diversity in the system is promoted relentlessly and in various ways by national government rather than districts as in the LAUSD portfolio management model. 24 Free Schools opened in September 2011 and a further 55 in September 2012. These are all-ability state-funded schools set up by members of the community “in response to what local people say they want and need in order to improve education for children in their community”.¹

More significantly, the Government has extended the previous Government’s policy by encouraging schools and, sometimes, mandating them to become academies, publicly funded independent schools that, in the Department for Education’s words:²

“ . . . benefit from greater freedoms to innovate and raise standards. These include:

- freedom from local authority control;
- the ability to set their own pay and conditions for staff;
- freedoms around the delivery of the curriculum; and
- the ability to change the lengths of terms and school days”.

Although they still represent less than 3% of schools nationally, by October 2012 there were 2373 academies with more continuously coming on stream. Already 50 per cent of secondary schools have become, or are in the process of becoming, academies. Like other schools, they are accountable to central government and the national inspection agency, Ofsted, but are usually free to select the support they need. Some look to private providers, others still access support from the local authority. Many are organised into chains. Sponsored academy chains have a lead sponsor who either sponsors or is responsible for a number of academies, usually three or more. Converter academy chains are groups of schools that, irrespective of performance, see benefits to converting to academy status as part of a formal partnership (DfE, 2011). As in LAUSD’s portfolio model, a range of governance options exists.

Governments of different political ideologies have also changed and, many argue, gradually reduced local authorities’ school improvement role, and two years ago the new Coalition Government set in motion policy whereby maintained schools have increasing responsibility for their own improvement within a ‘self-improving school system’ (DFE, 2010; Hargreaves, 2010). The success of this depends on empowering headteachers (principals) as change agents, using Wohlstetter and Smith’s term. Local authorities are also under increased pressure through their widened remit for a range of

children's services, increasingly coupled with adult services, such as communities, housing and leisure. It is not surprising that a recent Association of Directors of Children's Services report of two studies of the local authority's evolving improvement role (ACDS, 2012, p1) is titled The Missing Link.

Early exploration indicates that successful chains' improvement models share many of the characteristics of effective schools and districts cited in Trujillo's review, while also using the opportunity to move leaders and specialist staff around the chain and develop capacity through joint practice development (Fielding et al, 2005), whereby colleagues in different schools are "working together to test, assess and evolve more effective approaches to teaching and learning" (Hill et al, 2012, p.5). Another new policy initiative is the establishment of Teaching Schools³, some of which are academies, others maintained (local authority) schools. Over 200 of those applying have been approved since September 2011, with the intention to establish 500 by 2014-2015. These outstanding schools are charged with developing an alliance that includes other schools, higher education institutions and, frequently, the local authority, but the teaching schools take responsibility for identifying and coordinating expertise from across the alliance in addressing their six core functions ('the big six'): teacher recruitment and initial training; peer-to-peer professional and leadership development; identifying and developing leadership potential; improvement support for other schools; designating and brokering specialist leaders of education; and engaging in research and development. In ways, Teaching Schools appear to serve some of the functions of Children First Network facilitators, although they are not accountable to other schools in the same way.

Developing capacity – the critical role of the principal

Wohlstetter and Smith remind us that "the capacity to improve cannot be assumed". I wondered how some of the reforms discussed in the articles really help teachers improve their practice, never mind creating that capacity whereby they could develop into the kinds of knowledge workers (Schleicher, 2012) located in deep and sustainable professional learning communities that today's world demands; teachers who deeply understand and are committed to collaborative exploration and development of their practice. The evidence suggests that test-based accountability doesn't improve teachers' practice (Hamilton et al) and that educators are taking a superficial approach to evidence, with 60% believing that practitioner experience is more important than the data collected (Finnigan, Daly & Che). Teachers also are not being empowered (Wohlstetter and Smith). This suggests that the principal has a critical role in being able to take up that mantle of being the agent of change and in ensuring good connections with external facilitators, whether they are in the district or elsewhere. The social networking theory used by Finnigan et al. is helpful here in identifying where connections need strengthening.

In reading the challenges of the Children First Networks, it struck me that a potential danger of England's Teaching Schools and other similar networks led by outstanding principals is that they could create a wider divide between 'the best and the rest'. Facilitation skills and a deep understanding of adult learning and change are critical, and the mindset and approach to supporting other schools productively appears to depend on developing the right kind of relationship with its partner schools and other alliance partners:

It is not intended that a teaching school should in every way be better or more advanced than its partners. Certainly it has to be an outstanding school in Ofsted terms, but its task, as in any strategic alliance, is to be the network's hub or the nodal school that offers strategic leadership, and co-ordinates, monitors and quality assures alliance activities and expertise. The teaching school is not the positional, top dog type of leader, but rather the leader who has the right knowledge and skills (competence) to engage in the right kind of processes that produce the intended results of the partnership (Hargreaves, 2011, p.5)

Teaching schools are led by outstanding headteachers. Indeed, the underlying policy assumption in England seems to be that it will be a relatively small number of outstanding headteachers (approximately 5%) who will be the agents of change. The previous English government designed a range of strategies to develop the skills of system leaders, successful headteachers who could support colleagues in less effective schools. But, not all outstanding headteachers are necessarily excellent facilitators of other schools' development. Furthermore, unless a school is identified by Ofsted as 'inadequate', it is left to its own devices and can choose not to engage in networks with successful schools or with its local authority. While a new category of school, 'requires improvement' has appeared in the latest English external inspection framework (Ofsted, 2012), such schools are not deemed 'inadequate' but have one or more issues needing attention. While a first 'requires improvement' rating is likely to create more anxiety and a third consecutive one will place them in an 'inadequate' category, there is little incentive to seek help, engage with learning or network with others in an autonomous system.

Lateral learning for the mediating layer

Networking is increasingly being seen as a powerful school improvement strategy. Improvement through peers is identified as a feature of successful international systems that keep getting better (Mourshed et al, 2010). England's self-improving system is predicated on the ability of schools to network with and support each other. But is the system learning? Finnigan and colleagues suggest that the system in which low performing schools reside doesn't appear to have a research-oriented culture and Trujillo's characteristics of district effectiveness do not include district learning. What is the mediating layer learning, and how is this learning being shared across the system? What potential is

there for the collective responsibility that exists in school-based professional learning communities (Stoll et al, 2006) and networked learning communities between schools (Jackson and Temperley, 2007) to be a defining feature of an effective mediating tier? Hamilton and colleagues suggest consortia of districts and charter management organizations might be formed. In England, the Children's Improvement Board (CIB, 2005) made a case for sector-led improvement – with local authorities working collaboratively, and accepting collective responsibility for improving the performance of the sector as a whole through: “the strategic development of a system in which all partners within the sector make an active contribution to achieving excellence in children's services with the longer term aim of creating a self-improving world-class system of children's services”. The rhetoric of sector-led improvement across local councils is growing in England, but little research exists to identify indicators, characteristics or conditions for effectiveness. Perhaps organizational learning theory and social networking theory, employed by two of these research teams, might be employed by more organizations and agencies operating in the mediating tier. Irrespective of who provides the support to schools, such agencies and organizations need the capacity to learn their way through the challenges of schools that prove hard to improve.

Accountability for what?

My sense is that the best hope we have for the future will come through stimulating students' capacity for learning, developing the necessary dispositions and mindsets to carry them forward. The underlying rationale of underperformance, and how best to address this, that underpins the policy context of this collection is broadly defined and measured in terms of results of test results. Trujillo notes that 86% of studies she reviewed defined success by test scores and as several of the articles point out, the current focus on test performance is overly narrow. This frames much of existing activity and, as indicator systems are rare: “what is measured is what gets done” (Hamilton et al, p6). With increased attention to 21st century skills (Trilling and Fadal, 2009) and widespread concern about wellbeing (UNICEF, 2007), national, international and local district assessment systems have to broaden their measurement focus. The characteristics of effectiveness cited in Trujillo's review are those almost universally linked with outcomes on standardized reading and mathematics assessments. I was one of the School Matters research team that carried a major, longitudinal school effectiveness study in the UK (Mortimore et al, 1988). Unusually, we looked at a number of outcomes – reading, writing, mathematics, practical mathematics, oracy (speaking skills), self concept, attitudes, attendance and behaviour. Interestingly, we found that many of the teacher classroom behaviours and strategies associated with positive oracy outcomes were different from those associated with the more traditionally assessed cognitive outcomes (Mortimore et al, 1986). ACT21S⁴, based at the University of Melbourne, is developing methods to assess skills that will form the basis for 21st century curricula. These particularly emphasise communication and collaboration, problem-solving, citizenship and digital fluency. It is a hopeful sign that the 2015 PISA study will include assessment of collaborative

problem solving in online environments, using new assessment methodologies. It would be interesting to see whether the same characteristics of effective teachers, schools and districts would emerge when analysed in relation to collaborative problem solving or indeed measures of civic responsibility and other broader indicators mooted by Hamilton and colleagues. Countries like Singapore who perform highly on international assessments are realising that “being good at securing high standards in reading, writing and arithmetic alone doesn’t guarantee high performance across a broad, rich curriculum” (Barber et al, 2012, p 46) but the shift to an extended and deeper curriculum is hard, both culturally and in an education system that has been driven by a focus on improving basic skills. But there also appear to be forces within US schools that make it difficult to broaden outcomes: teachers who are concerned when state standards are “too broad” or educators who consider existing student performance data to be the most credible research evidence that exists.

Maybe a set of indicators of professional and organizational learning and capacity, at school, district, portfolio management or network level would be a useful addition to the accountability system?

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¹ <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/freeschools/b0061428/free-schools>

² <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/leadership/typesofschools/academies/b00205692/whatisanacademy>

³ <http://www.education.gov.uk/nationalcollege/index/support-for-schools/teachingschools.htm>

⁴ <http://atc21s.org/index.php/about/purpose/>