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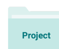

Exploring Leadership Development and Leadership Practice in Differentially Performing Education Systems - Cases from Hong Kong View project

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COMMENTARY

Leading system-wide improvement

ALMA HARRIS

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Introduction

Around the world there is a preoccupation with improving the performance of schools and school systems. Comparisons made between countries through PISA and PERLs have led to a preoccupation, and in some cases, an obsession, with securing a high position in the international league tables (Whelan 2009). The minds of policy-makers and politicians alike are sharply focused on finding effective ways of scaling the international performance ladder and moving ever closer to the elusive top. This article focuses on the potential challenges, complications and considerations for those leading change at scale.

For those countries at the apex, the task is simply staying there—for some, at any cost. For others, the actions of the 'best performers' are scrutinized and analysed in the vain hope of finding the main components of their success. Reports from commercial organizations fuel this hope by reinforcing that there are consistent features of the top performing and best education systems (Mourshed *et al.* 2010). The implication is clear: replicating such features could pay dividends and reproducing their policies could secure better educational performance.

While policy borrowing is far from a new enterprise, the harsh reality is that even the best policies travel badly. What works in Finland may not work as well, or indeed work at all, in a country with a different history, culture and social make-up. There is a powerful relationship between context and educational outcomes and, while policies can be borrowed, the cultural dimensions that make them work so well, unfortunately, cannot. There are inevitable pitfalls when superimposing policies from one context on another, and even with the most careful grafting they can disappoint by failing to deliver the outcomes anticipated.

Systems with a successful track record of improvement have tended to focus on internally-generated change, rather than relying at solutions

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made elsewhere. In Canada, Ontario dramatically improved its performance over a five-year period by pursuing a relentless focus on improving literacy and numeracy through the establishment of a dedicated literacy and numeracy secretariat (Levin 2008). In Finland, the story is one of a long-term commitment to teacher quality and holding those within the teaching profession in the highest esteem. The high performers all have long-term strategies and approaches to improvement in place and have actively built the capacity for change. This issue of capacity building will be discussed below, but, first and foremost, what do we know about leading system improvement?

Considerations, complications and challenges

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In economic theory, the concept of perfect competition provides an idealized type of producer practice. It is thought to explain business behaviour, but perfect competition does not exist in the real world. The various texts on system improvement, like perfect competition, are often idealized and divorced from the messy, irrational and complex reality of leading system change and effectively securing system improvement. Some accounts of system change pay scant attention to the challenges and difficulty of actually making improvement at scale happen. Instead, the complexity, tensions and contradictions that accompany any effective large-scale improvement (e.g. Levin 2008, Sharrat and Fullan 2009, Fullan 2010) are ignored and the harsh reality of leading improvement at the system level is lost in neat, often retrospective, narratives of success. So what are the considerations, complications and challenges for leaders of system improvement?

The first challenge and major consideration for anyone leading improvement at the system level is: what exactly is being led? Any system is comprised of separate and distinctive parts that co-exist but do not necessarily coalesce. An education system is no different. The sum of its various parts include national, district, school, professional and classroom components, and all these parts are micro-systems in their own right with their own distinctive sets of priorities, demands, imperfections and motivations. While connections exist among them, particularly through the strong bonds of accountability and control, as separate entities they are also able to resist, undermine and derail the most rigorous change and improvement efforts. Even the most effective education systems have their entrenched demarcations and powerful fault lines that make improvement and change at the system level more or less difficult to achieve.

Consequently, one of the main tasks facing those with responsibility to improve the system is that of clearly, consistently and regularly communicating what is to be changed and how. This constant drumbeat is essential if misinterpretation, misrepresentation and mischief making is not to be the inevitable outcome. In the rush to make things happen quickly, the core message can be lost, but the clarity of the message and the constancy of purpose ultimately make the difference between success and failure. High performing education systems have a well-articulated

and shared view about what their main priorities are and, most importantly, they know how to effectively achieve them (Whelan 2009). As Barber (2011: 3) notes: 'to have an impact: a system's aspirations must be clear, sharp and understandable to everyone … aspirations set the foundation for delivery because they set the bar for what the system will be asked to achieve'. Leaders of system improvement therefore need to understand exactly what they are leading, clearly communicate their intentions for change while actively building connections, coherence and alignment across all parts of the system. This alignment is best achieved through identifying a few clear priorities for improvement and ensuring that these are embraced, embedded and reinforced (Fullan 2010).

A serious problem and complication for leaders of system improvement arises when there are multiple challenges and when change is needed on various fronts. With so much to be improved within the system, the temptation is to try and address every issue or problem simultaneously, rather than focusing on a limited number of priorities or attending the few core things that will make the greatest difference. The natural inclination is to try to address multiple challenges with multiple policy interventions which will ultimately prove to be counterproductive, as they will only compete for time, energy and resources. In addition, while these multiple policy interventions may seem clear and partially connected at the planning stage, they will free fall into a tangled mess once they hit the system. Moreover, they will send a contradictory and confusing set of signals into the system about what is most important and where energies need to be placed. Unpredictable and counter-productive responses will certainly follow, as those within the system struggle to make sense of the different messages contained in policies that were disconnected in the first place.

For those leading system change, choosing a number of 'right but misdirected' policies is almost as bad as overloading the system with too many. In his work, Fullan (2011) talks about the 'wrong drivers' for leading system reform and highlights how they can potentially damage the system and undermine any chance of improvement. But even if the right policies are in place and they are few in number, this still does not guarantee success. In leading system improvement, the critical issue of implementation is often overshadowed by the policy formulation process. While producing policy after policy may satisfy those within governments, it will do little to change the system unless sufficient thought has been given to the actual process of delivery or implementation. It remains the case that only a small proportion of the outcomes of the policy-making process actually has any impact upon practice. This is chiefly because insufficient time and attention have been paid to the mechanics of implementation or the 'hard work' of turning policy into practice. As Levin (2008: 3) highlights, vision may be important 'but so is the much less glorious work of looking after all the details that make things work' (Levin 2008: 3).

High performing systems combine the right change strategies and approaches but they also seem to know how to implement them most effectively (Fullan 2011). Effective delivery requires sustained prioritization and consistent attention to the evidence that shows that progress is

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actually being made: 'Delivery can be described as gentle pressure, relentlessly applied' (Barber 2011: 33). The challenge, for those responsible for system improvement, is to ensure that implementation is an intrinsic part of policy development and that there is a clear theory of change that not only explains how goals will be achieved but also details the necessary steps and changes in practice to achieve them.

Issues of timing and timescale are also important considerations when leading improvement at scale. The timescales for national policy-makers are very different from those who work in other parts of the system because of the highly politicized context in which they operate. Different time scales can result in frustration, tensions and misunderstanding because different parts of the system are unable to recognize or appreciate the time pressures on other parts of the system. The reality of large-scale reform means that there are always going to be competing timescales and deadlines which can undermine the implementation processes unless they are anticipated and addressed.

Another major complication for those leading improvement in the system is the potential to inadvertently introduce distractions which detract from the core priorities and the essential improvement work. These distractions in the system can take various forms, but essentially their introduction results in discontentment and debate which divert attention away from the main priorities. An example of this could be a new way of assessing school performance or additional measures for tackling ineffective teachers—which may be perfectly reasonable and indeed very important, but because of their very nature, take focus and energy away from improving performance. Such distractions serve to take attention away from the central improvement agenda.

But how do leaders know if they are introducing distractions into the system and an inevitable drift is taking place? The short answer is that they will not, unless there are effective feedback loops and processes in place within the system to signal that there is a problem or an issue. This does not mean imposing stricter external accountability measures that constrain or harm the system, but rather ensuring that information flows freely, and robust monitoring of data and strong internal accountability processes are in place to highlight potential threats to progress.

High performing systems know how to diagnose performance with precision, they track and monitor progress against their delivery plans (Spillane and Coldren 2011). They also build the capacity for change and improvement. Without purposeful, focused and sustained capacity building, evidence shows that implementation will be superficial at worst, and uneven at best, and where any learning gains are likely to be short-lived (Fullan 2010). As Levin (2008: 81) emphasizes, 'change is hard to do and takes sustained effort … gradually we have come to learn that real change requires will, skill and capacity'. The power of collective working to build the capacity for system improvement is, above all, the most important consideration for leaders of system improvement (Fullan 2010, 2011, Hargreaves *et al.* 2011, Levin 2008).

In summary, the considerations for leading system improvement are as follows:

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1. Generate a coherent and clear set of limited goals with a clear moral purpose.
2. Communicate clearly, continuously and relentlessly about what is important and what needs to be done.
3. Select the right drivers, whatever resistance there might be.
4. Avoid multiple interventions, u-turns and policy borrowing.
5. Ensure that the implementation plan is informed by a theory of action and that it is implicit in policy formation.
6. Appreciate and accommodate different and competing timescales where feasible and practical.
7. Avoid creating unnecessary distractions in the system and, if they occur, recalibrate the system quickly to refocus on the key priorities.
8. Establish feedback loops at all levels in the system so that progress can be routinely monitored and problems addressed as soon as possible.
9. Invest in internal accountability processes and measures to monitor and to allow the system to self-regulate.
10. Build professional skills and capability at all levels to deliver change and improvement.

Leaders of system improvement also need to be aware that there are still prevalent myths or fallacies about system improvement that are still influential but, as Fullan (2010) notes, are 'powerfully wrong'. The final section of this article considers the fallacies of system improvement, drawing upon the findings of a recent research study of high performing organizations and systems (Hargreaves *et al.* 2011). I conclude by arguing that the single most important factor in leading successful system-level improvement is capacity building (Harris 2011).

Fallacies of system improvement

The first fallacy of system improvement concerns the notion of quick turnaround, essentially the possibility of achieving sustainable, improved system performance in the short term. Evidence from high performing systems and organizations that exceed expectations reveal that their success has been achieved from many years of hard work and a sustained focus on a limited set of goals (Hargreaves *et al.* 2011). Others associate the failure of large-scale reform with the reckless speed of change and the desire to scale up far too quickly. The desire for change is often politically motivated by the need for quick-fix change, irrespective of its focus or its potential outcomes. Fast change may be politically expedient, but it can also result in undue pressure being placed upon the system, which could be potentially damaging (Cheng and Walker 2008). So the message is one of investing in the right things at the right pace for the long term.

The second fallacy, and one that is still very prevalent and powerful, is that standardization and accountability will yield improvement and better results. Many countries are slowly emerging from years of standardiza-

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tion and prescription with relatively little to show in terms of performance for making this choice. While punitive forces may work initially, evidence suggests that high performing systems balance pressure and support: they empower people to perform while holding them accountable for performance. They make decisions about mandating vs. persuading and tend not to set quantitative targets or publish comparative performance data (Mourshed *et al.* 2010: 3). Improvement is much more likely in systems that are supported rather than punished and where there is a concerted effort to support and motivate educators rather than relying on simple accountability measures to ratchet up their performance.

The last fallacy is that of replacement, which suggests that system-wide reform is only possible with significant changes in staff at all levels. While some personnel changes will be inevitable and indeed desirable, sweeping changes in personnel will be costly, demoralizing and unlikely to produce results. High performing education systems are characterized by well-managed personnel succession and high personnel stability in the context of deeper and more lasting change efforts (Whelan 2009). While there can be benefits from changes in expertise and new ideas that result from changes in personnel, the evidence shows that improvement is perfectly possible without a major overhaul of existing staff, as long as there is an investment in improving skills, expertise and capability. In other words, building the capacity for improvement within the existing system is more likely to result in improved performance than is relying on additional or new expertise.

The challenge of transforming an entire education system cannot be underestimated. There are no silver bullets, but it is increasingly clear that collective professional capacity is an important and powerful contributor to better system performance (Whelan 2009, Mourshed *et al.* 2010). The central element in any successful change process is what Fullan (2010) describes as 'capacity building with a focus on results'. The evidence from the Mourshed *et al.* (2010: 11) report also shows that 'for a system's improvement journey to be sustained over the long term, improvements have to be integrated into the very fabric of the system pedagogy'. The report further suggests that there are three ways that improving systems achieve this: 'by establishing collaborative practices, by developing a mediating layer between the schools and the centre and by architecting tomorrow's leadership' (Mourshed *et al.* 2010: 11).

So those in charge of leading system reform could do far worse than invest in the professional learning of those within the system in order to improve the system, as it is ultimately here that the difference will be made. Any education system, however good or bad, cannot move or improve without actively building the capacity to do so. For this, it needs the collective will, skill and leadership of those working at all levels in the system, moving in a common direction with the same conviction and shared purpose. There needs to be alignment, mutual understanding and flexibility, rather than rigidity and prescription, if a system is to perform at its best. Leading system reform is not about mandating, driving or demanding better performance, it is about creating the conditions where

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professional knowledge and skills are enhanced, where effective leadership exists at all levels and, most importantly, where the success of every child in every setting is the main driver and ultimate goal of system improvement.

Note

The views represented in this article are the author's own personal views and do not represent the views of the Welsh Government.

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