

Inside-out and downside-up

How leading from the middle has the power to transform education systems

A think/action piece by
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The purpose of this Think Piece was to stimulate discussion at the Global Dialogue event that took place on February 11, 2016 that brought together educators from five countries to debate the challenges and opportunities presented by cluster-based school collaboration when used as a vehicle for school improvement. We were joined in that debate by John Hattie, Viviane Robinson, Tony Mackay and hundreds of teachers, school leaders and other educationalists. The Global Dialogue ended with a call to action that will be followed up with a second dialogue later in 2016.

This joint effort has grown from conversations we have been having over the last few months and we are very excited to have the opportunity to share and debate some of the crucial tensions and issues facing educators and policy makers alike.

In the paper we start by commenting briefly on what we see as the inadequacies of the status quo; second, we propose a model of school collaboration which we feel has the potential to mitigate this issue; and third, we return to the bigger picture and in particular the role of the Leader in the Middle – the networked leader. These are leaders who link laterally to create change in the middle as they partner upwards with the state and downwards to all schools and communities. In each section, we have included some questions to the reader as the basis for reflection now and as a stimulus for future debate.

Finally, we think it is important to explain what this paper is not. This isn't an academic paper and isn't intended for submission to a peer-reviewed journal. We are interested in peer review, but not in this way! We have included some references in a bibliography at the end for anyone interested in finding out more about these issues, but the majority of evidence we draw on here comes from our practice and experience. We share this to provide stimulus both for leaders in localities who want to make a bigger difference, and for those whose role it is to support and leverage such leaders for system transformation. We hope you enjoy it and we look forward to discussing it with you.



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There is something wrong with the big picture

1

Many of us have worked for years in systems which are caught in a struggle between state- and country-level policy on the one hand and the action or inaction of individual schools on the other. Policy pushes in one direction, the profession pulls in another. The result is a type of friction which produces heat but not light: plenty of activity but not enough systematic change or improvement in outcomes.

Where does this tension come from? A few years ago, Michael wrote a policy paper entitled 'Choosing the wrong drivers for whole system reform' that illustrates the way in which good intentions delivered through a 'driver' – a policy intended to bring about major improvements in learning and student attainment in the system – often fail to help or even make things worse. The wrong drivers that he identified are worryingly familiar: external accountability, individualistic policies, superficial use of technology, and ad hoc policies. External accountability fails to motivate people; individualistic policies (standards and other methods to increase the quality of individuals) do not affect cultures; technology skims the surface; and ad hoc policies undercut coherence and focus.

We all know what happens next. The end result is exhausted, discouraged teachers and leaders, stretched on the rack of contract accountability but not given the capacity – the time, resources or support – to make any of this really work. Policymakers are left scratching their heads, wondering why change is so resistant to their will. Students – the intended beneficiaries of these drivers – don't really see what the fuss was about.

Why might this be so common? As Michael has written elsewhere, "You might ask why politicians endorse solutions that don't work. The answer is not complicated: because they can legislate them;

because they are in a hurry; because the remedies can be made to appeal superficially to the public; because (and unkindly on our part) some of them really don't care about the public education system, preferring that education be taken over by the private sector; and (more kindly) because they do not know what else to do."

Even when politicians think they are supporting schools – for example by freeing the professionals to teach and lead as they best see fit – the complexities of systems can have unintended or unforeseen consequences. Releasing schools through greater autonomy and reducing central control has the effect of reducing system presence and capacity. Various site-based or school autonomy policies have been tried, with the result that some schools improve, but large numbers don't, and if, anything, the gap between high- and low-performing schools becomes greater. Variety and localism can easily become isolation and fragmentation. The onus is firmly on the shoulders of schools and school leaders to mitigate these issues, but – again – the capacity to really address them is often absent, leading to a sense of deep frustration on the part of many leaders.

A final bit of 'negativity' before we begin describing the alternative. The changes we envisage will be particularly difficult to achieve because the wrong drivers have been around a long time, and tend to be deeply ensconced in the habits and cultures of most systems. Prolonged ineffectiveness also incubates bad habits on the part of leaders. In the same way that a bad relationship brings out the worst in both parties, continuous bad policies undermine leadership at all levels. A sense of ennui and victimhood becomes established and the appetite for leading system change diminishes. If you can't beat 'em...



But enough doom and gloom! What is the way forward? We are all motivated, committed professionals working in systems which – at least in theory – give us the licence and autonomy to shape our professional futures. And despite the challenges described above, we do see individual schools, and even local areas, bucking these trends and establishing pockets of success (often as a result of exceptional leaders).

Our claim, however, is that the exceptions do not, and cannot, become cumulative across a whole system. You can't run a whole system for all students in a region, state or country by relying entirely on exceptional leadership in each school. The more things change in small pockets, the more things, overall, tend to remain the same, with the exceptional schools attracting the best talent and the rest left struggling in comparison.

In the section that follows, we propose that system-wide school collaboration is the key to unlocking this issue. But before we do, let us pause for a moment to reflect on some of the questions that are preoccupying the two of us.

So, if top-down change does not work, and bottom-up change is not coherent or too variable, what is the solution?

1. How can we make national policy that recognises and builds upon local solutions and emergent effective practice?
2. How can we create the conditions for bottom-up change and ensure that it is joined up and focused on high quality across the whole system?
3. How do you transfer the learning from the pockets of success into system change?
4. What forms of accountability would incentivise system-wide school collaboration?
5. What specifically do school and related network collaborations do to increase collective teacher efficacy and generate measurable impact on student learning?

School-to-school networks: All rise

2

We now turn our attention to school collaboration. Given our interest in whole system change let us be clear where we think we should be heading. Our strong belief is that all schools, 100%, should be involved in focused, productive networks within which leaders, teachers and students challenge, support, innovate and learn from one another in ways that measurably improve outcomes. The solution we advocate is one of networks at local, regional and national level that respect the autonomy of schools and their leaders, but connect them together in focused cooperation, leading to improved outcomes and strong collective accountability for achieving those outcomes. Our solution also connects schools and school leaders to the political and accountability system in a coherent, positive and proactive manner.

As John Hattie stressed in the Global Dialogue on this paper we need to be careful that networks do not become the latest 'silver bullet'. He stresses, and we agree, that this is highly focused and precise work. Networks are a means to an end. That end is to create new forces that strengthen the leadership and collective efficacy of teachers to make a difference in the learning of all students. This will entail 'new work' on a scale hitherto not seen. Here are some of the characteristics of this work: identifying and sharing specific instructional practices that impact learning; protocols for sharing data that demonstrate evidence of impact, consensus that teachers, school leaders and schools collaborate with others on what and how to teach; and seeking expertise wherever it can be found inside or outside the school. The thrust of our article is that the middle (networks of schools and districts) should take greater, collective responsibility for the betterment of student outcomes.

Both of us are on record as firm advocates of this approach; but neither of us has shied away from the challenges involved in building system transformation through a widespread commitment to effective collaboration. Building capacity and developing a sense of shared accountability, trust and the right balance between autonomy and connectedness is hard in any single organisation, but with insightful and skilled leadership over time it can be achieved. It is much harder to achieve this across a group of schools who may be in a competitive relationship and who may have different cultures and priorities. The effort involved in effective collaboration means hard-pressed and time-poor leaders and teachers may not believe that such commitment is worth it. To do all this in a climate of strong and often counter-productive top-down national accountability measures makes it even more daunting.

What needs to happen for this type of networked system – and the school improvement benefits we believe it promises – to become a reality? We have a pretty good understanding of the activities and leadership strategies which lead to within-school effectiveness; there is much less known about what constitutes an effective school-to-school network, and still less about what constitutes an effective networked system. Despite this, educators around the world are applying these approaches and in some – though not all – cases, seeing real benefits from this approach.

Is it possible to bottle this understanding of what works? As a basis for discussion, we would like to propose the following as a list of the 'critical success factors' in relation to school collaboration. These factors draw heavily on the wisdom of practice and the growing understanding we and our fellow professionals are developing as we create, innovate



and evaluate functioning school networks. This list is consistent with what we are finding constitutes success in organisations that achieve greater coherence – a clear sense of direction, effective collaboration, deep learning and secure accountability from the inside out. So, as a starter for ten:

Critical success factors for effective system-wide school collaboration:

- 1.** Above all, the purpose of collaboration must be to improve outcomes.
- 2.** Building on **1.** every partnership must be founded on a clearly articulated shared moral purpose.
- 3.** If we accept **2.** then we should also see that transparency, trust and honesty are both crucial and a professional obligation.
- 4.** A commitment to and capacity for effective peer review form the engine that drives improvement under these conditions.
- 5.** For reasons of practicality and efficacy, peer review needs to be carried out within a long-term relationship and a commitment to

continuously improving practice and systems through cycles of collaborative enquiry.

- 6.** The partnership must grow over time: it should have a plan to move from collaboration to co-responsibility to a position of shared professional accountability.
- 7.** The partnership must not be bound by the commitment of individuals: it should go beyond relationships between school leaders to engage with students, teachers, families and communities.
- 8.** Partnerships should not be isolated but, in a spirit of reciprocity, should welcome scrutiny and support from other partnerships as their contribution to a connected local, regional and national system.

You may be thinking that you have seen lists like this before, or that you see some of these success factors in your everyday practice. The point here is not to create a 'shopping list', but that the factors are both dynamic and interdependent; they strengthen each other in a way that means all are essential if we are to achieve system-wide collaboration. Let's unpack each one a little more.

Factor 1: The purpose of collaboration must be to improve outcomes.

The primary purpose of any network should be school improvement. There are clearly other benefits – economic, social – but the bottom line must be to improve outcomes. Effective within-school improvement is driven by a sharp focus on outcomes and activity is only valid if its impact can be seen on the learning of children. We should apply the same principles to collaborative school improvement. Without a focus on outcomes, the cost/benefit of collaboration isn't convincing.

Factor 2: The partnership must be founded on a clearly articulated shared moral purpose.

The one sure way to keep educators focused on finding a way through the problems inherent to network partnership is the commitment to making a difference to the lives of children. Partnerships that fail to recognise this explicitly within their 'contract' are missing the opportunity to use the most powerful possible lever for change: shared moral purpose. This was one of the key factors in the success of schools in London over the last ten years, and is seen again and again in successful system transformation globally.

Factor 3: Transparency, trust and honesty are crucial.

A strong theme in the successes that we have been observing is the building of a feedback-rich culture, linked to the specific goals of the school or cluster and focused on improvement. Wrong forms of feedback (individualistic, judgmental) have given the practice such a bad name that actual, helpful feedback has all but disappeared or has been misinterpreted. This can't be allowed to happen as, without feedback, there is little growth.

Of course, the key is honesty and candour, combined with autonomy. We are not the first sector to learn this. As Ed Catmull, the CEO of Pixar, observes, "Any successful feedback is built on empathy, in the idea that we are all in this together, that we understand your pain because we've experienced it ourselves." Pixar advocates

early and continuous peer review based on the twin values of candour and autonomy: they establish norms of hard-edged feedback, but leave it to the recipient to take it or leave it. Paradoxically, the more autonomy people have, the more likely they are to take direct feedback seriously (otherwise they become defensive).

Factor 4: A commitment to and capacity for effective peer review form the engine that drives improvement.

For us, the most important lesson we are learning is about the sheer power of effective peer review: there is no better way to build trust, develop capacity and increase collective accountability across schools than a robust peer review model, especially when the model has been developed by schools themselves.

We see this time and again in practice. To give just one example from the evaluation of a peer review intervention in a school our colleagues have been working with:

"Peer review has had an enabling impact on the relationships within the schools, improving the social and decisional capital of the group. [This] development of professional capital will drive a fundamental shift in the improvement dynamics of the schools. The partnership's experience [of the programme] has been extremely powerful. Excellent practice has been identified in all of the reviewed schools, and has already begun to be shared across the wider collaboration. It has been a significant catalyst for change and improvement in a truly collaborative culture, growing a thirst for delivering school-to-school support, sharing CPD needs, and identifying opportunities for research and further Joint Practice Development."

Factor 5: Peer review needs to be carried out within a long-term relationship and a commitment to continuously improving practice and systems through cycles of collaborative enquiry.

Culture change lies at the heart of effective peer review, where the focus is not on the practice of peer review to 'prove' but to 'improve'. This requires



a commitment to relationship building and the development of a culture across the cluster where the scrutiny of one another's practice (in a climate of enquiry and learning) is the goal. Although it is early days in which to demonstrate impact, we are both extremely pleased to see that, through Education Development Trust's **Schools Partnership Programme**, over 400 schools in England are starting to see results by using an approach to improvement that empowers and connects them in a mutual commitment to improvement.

Factor 6: The partnership must have a plan to move from collaboration to co-responsibility to a position of shared professional accountability.

How can networks go from relationships based on activity to fostering a genuine sense of shared accountability for outcomes? It isn't easy, but we are starting to see green shoots of voluntary, collective accountability being developed and implemented in pockets. In England, some groups of schools are developing their own local collective partnerships that address capacity building and hard-edged accountability in equal measure. We are starting to see voluntary partnerships of schools going public on what outcomes they are going

to achieve; how they will measure those outcomes; which individuals will be held responsible for which aspect; and how those outcomes will be published in an open and transparent way. Though indirect, this form of accountability is really more explicit, more present, and, we believe, more compelling than top-down accountability. As Michael has written elsewhere, its components are:

- *"A small number of ambitious goals, processes that foster shared goals (and even targets if jointly shaped)*
- *Good data that are used primarily for developmental purposes*
- *Implementation strategies that are transparent, whereby people and organisations are grouped to learn from each other (using the group to change the group)*
- *Examination of progress and impact in order to problem-solve for greater performance"*

This mutual accountability approach embraces the national accountability requirements, but goes much further. Schools working together in more hard-edged partnerships can look out for the vulnerable or isolated school, broker support where it is most needed and provide a richer, more worthwhile and fit-for-purpose local accountability system.

Factor 7: The partnership should go beyond school leaders and engage with students, teachers, families and communities.

To ensure deep and lasting culture change it requires not only senior leaders to engage in peer review and collaborative enquiry but middle leaders, teachers, teaching assistants, school boards and the children and young people themselves. We see a potential risk to system change if too much effort is focused on building the capacity of principals and senior leaders through intensive programmes, without recognising the developmental needs of middle leaders and classroom practitioners. We also fear that a focus on leaders weakens the potency of horizontal accountability: a commitment to listening to the student and parent voice and the engagement of governors and community groups dramatically increase the 'stakes' in autonomous systems. Putting it another way, by privileging the role of the principals within school networks, we risk replacing one form of top-down accountability (national) with another (within-network).

Factor 8: Partnerships welcome scrutiny and support from other partnerships as their contribution to a connected local, regional and national system.

Highly collaborative, accountable and supportive partnerships provide a powerful vehicle for school improvement, offering challenge to keep one another honest and capacity to continue to improve. However, within an autonomous system there is a very real danger that groups of schools become isolated and the system becomes fractured: we may end up replacing autonomous and isolated schools with autonomous and isolated clusters. If this happens, we lose the benefits of the greater capacity, challenge and efficiency that can be achieved by localities working together towards shared goals. We are also in danger of losing the sense of 'place', which is so often cited as a mobilising factor in the most successful reform journeys. We believe that cluster-to-cluster review and validation adds huge value and provides an excellent basis from which to determine how best to use system resources at the local level.

So where does this leave us? School-to-school networks are on the rise, but require highly specific development in order to be truly effective and to influence state and country policies. They require participants to keep conducting business locally while participating in the challenge of whole-system transformation, which brings fundamental challenges to capacity. And, as we have said, an important variable is a new form of leadership, both locally and nationally. But before we consider the leadership challenges, let's take a step back to reflect on what we've seen so far.

The above is – we feel – a good attempt at summarising what we know about effective school collaboration. We do not pretend that it is based on quantitative analysis or experimental data; rather on what we see in the countries in which we are working.

1. To what extent does each ring true to you? And is this the complete list?

2. What evidence do you have that this works (or not) from your local context?

3. Which aspects are easy to implement or already widely in place? Which aspects present real challenges?

Leadership for a networked system

3

So how do we get from here to there? How do we move from a single focus on top-down accountability or on bottom-up incoherence and variability? Our basic change principle is that all effective change processes shape and reshape ideas as they build capacity and shared ownership. A direction of travel can be set by the centre, but the detailed reality cannot be dictated. We might call this joined-up, transparent effort to achieve system-wide impact **connected autonomy**. Autonomy is a tricky concept in school and system improvement. When the term autonomy is used individuals and subgroups sometimes think this means total freedom. In our view individuals or groups are not free to be on their own. In 'leadership from the middle' they are responsible for and indeed, required to connect with others in a joint, transparent effort to examine and improve practices that increase collective efficacy in schools within the network.

A fundamental change paradox is that enduring change has a degree of voluntarism combined with strong expectations and principles that push and pull a given change forward. We have come to refer to this as the 'voluntary but inevitable' principle. For example, New Zealand's Investment in Education Services policy proposal in January of 2014 was initially met with great resistance until a Joint Initiative between the government and the unions set out guidelines for implementation in April 2015. Schools now have the opportunity to belong to a cluster, as part of the Communities of Learning Initiative. This voluntary process is underpinned by agreed principles and values that guide the establishment of networks. As a result, the number of schools participating in Communities of Learning networks will likely approach 100% by the end of 2017.

If we are to move to a joined-up, fully networked system, what is being asked of relatively autonomous school leaders is a very significant cultural change. Even though the status quo is unsatisfactory for most educators, the alternative that we are recommending is not yet proven, particularly at system level. The expectations for being in a network of schools are unclear. Effective outcomes-based collaboration is not yet deeply established – so there are few friends or colleagues to learn from; the support structures are unknown; rewards are distant and lack specificity, while the dangers are in the present. How do we get school leaders to make the move to a more collaborative way of operating? Why should they give up some of their autonomy in return for greater connectedness? How do we achieve connected autonomy across groups of schools?

Considering the tensions and barriers to change that we have already outlined, we shouldn't be surprised that many leaders become worn down, defensive or overly pragmatic, beaten down by accountability and exhausted by the pressure of increased single-school autonomy without the means to invest in capacity. Our proposed solution is not that top officials will somehow see the light and change their approach to top-down accountability, though we are committed to working with them to consider this. Rather, we believe that the remedy lies with 'Leaders in the Middle' (of schools, of networks) who reverse the direction of influence while becoming better partners upward.

We recognise that this is quite an 'ask'. But we believe that leaders can either remain a victim of fragmented and top-down policies or they can turn the tables. The idea is not to be a rebel for the sake of it but to change the game from compliance to



purposeful focus. It is the responsibility of leaders to shape the culture and to ensure that, although they take account of the external national accountability requirements, they develop an internal, collective accountability system that leads to the right outcomes. Leaders in the Middle need to develop ambitious, well-evidenced alternatives that develop capacity at the heart of the system, while contending with and influencing accountability upward.

In short, the goal is to develop something at the school and local level that embraces state or national accountability, but is neither overwhelmed nor diminished by it.

All well and good. But what are the skills and behaviours that a successful Leader in the Middle might be equipped with? We think the list below is a sensible first attempt at the 'job description':

- ✓ Skilled at giving robust and honest feedback with candour and empathy
- ✓ Highly data literate, able to combine quantitative and qualitative information to create new insights into inter-school performance

- ✓ Skilled at problem definition and solution design, helping to create innovative new approaches with key local partners
- ✓ Able to create and drive effective collaborative networks of schools; learns from the group and helps the group learn
- ✓ Able to develop approaches which share accountability and collective responsibility
- ✓ A courageous grasper of nettles, willing to confront poor performance on the basis of moral purpose
- ✓ Having a deep understanding of whole-system reform issues and how to make sense of them at local level in the interests of student learning
- ✓ Passionate about the work and able to agitate for systemic change at the local level
- ✓ Exceptional networker and connector of people, able to broker constructive relationships where none looked possible
- ✓ Demonstrates ambition for the system whilst modelling humility for self.

This is what we believe the system needs of its leaders. As Viviane Robinson stressed in the Global Dialogue, do we have a cadre of leaders that can effectively lead from the middle? She noted that a significant problem is the inequity of leadership skill among school leaders. The challenge is how to increase the quality of work relationships, trust and collaboration while increasing the quality of outcomes amidst a complex context. As Robinson stressed, networks require leaders, and structural arrangements are

not as critical as the minute details related to the capabilities of leadership that will be required. And, of course this cuts both ways: what of those who lead whole systems – across states or whole countries? What is now required of them, if the system is to develop along the fundamental lines that we have described? How do they release some of their control, while remaining engaged in overall system improvement? This chart below outlines the behaviours and approaches that they would need to demonstrate:

SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT LEADERS	TRADITIONAL LEADERS OF SCHOOL SYSTEMS
Preoccupied with the interests of students	Preoccupied with the interests of politically powerful adults
Establishes a judicious balance of professional challenge and support	Emphasises either professional support or professional challenge but not both
Actively engages with and visible to Leaders in the Middle	Typically active and visible at central office level. Not close to schools
Persistent, consistent and sustained approach to long-term reform	Regularly sponsors new short-term initiatives without seeing the existing ones through
Treats teachers and leaders as part of the solution	As part of the problem, teachers and leaders are criticised and ground down
System leadership action is based on a coherent theory of change, aligned to evidence and monitoring data	Leadership insights are based on political dogma, media pressure or today's big thing
Champions school-to-school knowledge transfer and joint practice development as the key driver of change	Imposes top-down legislation or policy to tackle school effectiveness problems
Knowledgeable about promising approaches used by other systems	Introspective, with limited professional engagement beyond their own experience
Leads change at pace but builds coalitions and ensures that enough of a critical mass will go with the change (<i>voluntary but inevitable</i>)	Either risk-averse and slow to change or requires too much incoherent change which alienates teachers and leaders

We are each committed to continuing to support leaders in building effective outcomes-based collaboration, to demonstrating the efficacy of the approach and to influencing policymakers about what is needed from them. But to change a culture, leaders within the system cannot be passive victims of someone else's accountability system. Instead they should work to prove that cluster-based accountability can and will lead to better and more sustainable improvement. We need leaders who do not just accept the context but act in ways that change the context.

If this paper has prompted you to consider the role of effective outcomes-based collaboration in your context, and you would like to discuss this further, please do get in touch via the email addresses overleaf.

When considering your own context, it may be useful to think about the following:

Going deeper into effective leadership in a networked system

Giving more thought to the most appropriate and effective network systems, structures and processes

Giving more attention to accountability in a networked based system

Being more explicit about the theory of action regarding a network based system and the need to build the capacity of those who 'lead from the middle'

GET IN TOUCH

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SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

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