The development of school leadership practices for 21st century schools

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1 INTRODUCTION

Why invest in school leadership development? Across the world there is considerable change going on in education. Many education systems are giving localities and schools more autonomy, so that decisions can be taken at local level and thus be more appropriate for the context. Along with more freedoms, we are also seeing an increase in external pressure on schools, as governments and officials seek to show that their reforms are making an impact and that resources are being used effectively. In many systems, schools are being asked to teach a new more future-focused curriculum, accompanied by different accountability and assessment requirements. Meanwhile, parents and communities are making increasing demands upon schools not just to address academic learning but to help children to be happy, well-balanced and flexible citizens of the future in a world of increasing diversity, mobility and complexity. At the same time, developments in technology and social media mean that the safeguarding of children is becoming more complex, as young people find themselves on the one hand better connected than their parents ever were but also, in many cases, more isolated and more vulnerable.

However, any government wanting to help schools to rise to the challenges of the 21st century has a real problem: how to introduce initiatives that will have a positive impact. We know that, as far as factors within the school are concerned, it is the interactions that teachers have with children and young people—inside and outside the classroom—that will have the most impact on outcomes for students. But how do you change these interactions? How do you help individual teachers to develop new skills and behaviours to address new challenges? It is a long journey from a decision made in a government office to what happens in classrooms across a whole state or country. Indeed, the likelihood that any top-down, central reform will have a positive impact across a whole education system is remote. As Michael Fullan and I have written elsewhere:

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. (Munby & Fullan, **2016**, p. 3)

We are left with:

[…] 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. Policy makers are left scratching their heads, wondering why change is so resistant to their will. (Munby & Fullan, **2016**, p. 3)

Of course, it is possible to mandate the changes and to reinforce implementation through rigorous monitoring and high-stakes accountability, but this is expensive, is hard to sustain and is likely to have a negative impact on the attraction and retention of good teachers and leaders.

The fact is that if change is going to happen in a positive way in schools and in classrooms then two things are needed. First of all, teachers and school leaders need to embrace change—or at least a critical mass needs to do so—and shape it for themselves. This is about hearts and minds; ownership, and motivation. The second thing that is needed for change to be effective is an opportunity for teachers to develop and practice those new skills that are needed within a capacity-building culture—a culture that is low on blame and high on supportive development.

This is why school leadership is so fundamental to successful reform in education. If the proposed change from government is top-down, then there is very little likelihood that the change will happen in practice. If, however, school leaders are helping to lead the change there is a chance of success. For this to happen, school leaders need to demonstrate:

- **upward leadership** to influence national or state policy
- **lateral leadership** to collaborate with other schools and ensure knowledge transfer and collective efficacy across schools
- **institutional leadership** to ensure that their own staff feel valued and supported in shaping the changes in a way that is right for their school

If school leaders are able to, and empowered to, work at all three levels, then they will be in a much better position to articulate the rationale for change in a compelling manner and to work collaboratively to implement the reforms in a way that is appropriate to their own context. Reforms are more likely to be successful if school leaders help to shape the culture in their schools so that new skills can be developed and evaluated in a climate of trust and constructive learning. In short, without highly skilled and highly influential school leadership, any reform agenda will fail. Effective, flexible, intelligent,

empathetic and knowledgeable school leadership is crucial if schools are to respond in a positive and creative way to the challenges presented by governments, communities and society. It should therefore be no surprise to see that many systems are now realising that investing in school leadership development is essential if they are to have a successful education system. All around the world we are seeing leadership institutes or leadership academies being set up to address this issue and there is an increasing awareness that something needs to be done to support school leaders if the demands from governments and from society are to be addressed. Once we accept that we need to invest in the development of school leaders, there are then three strategic questions to answer:

1. **Who** should get access to leadership development? If a government has limited resources and needs to prioritise, which group should get access to this support?
2. **What** kind of leadership development should be provided? What should it cover?
3. **How** should leadership development be carried out? What are the best ways to develop leaders?

2 WHO SHOULD GET ACCESS TO LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT?

Of course, leaders at all levels will benefit from access to high quality leadership development, but I believe that the priority target group for leadership development should be aspirant school principals. The rationale for this is that aspirant principals have a motive to want to learn and to improve their leadership—in order to secure a principal role—and will therefore be keen to enrol in a leadership program. In contrast, a focus, for example, on serving principals is more likely to lead to a mixed response. Aspirant principals are crucial because, once in post, it is the school principal more than any other individual who will have an impact on the culture of the school. Their impact on the ways of working in the school is greater than any middle leader or any regional or district leader or school improvement partner. If the program for aspirant principals focuses also on how leaders spot and develop talent and grow future leaders in their schools, then the investment is likely to be even more effective.

Most systems have, roughly, a 10% turnover of principals per year. Over a ten-year period, a system can be significantly improved, as more expert and more reflective principals take up their posts. Of course, this requires the programme to be of high quality and the delegates on the program to have the potential to become highly effective principals. Therefore, both the quality bar for the programme and the quality bar for acceptance to the programme need to be very high. Too many systems around the world have failed to ensure this and as a result have damaged the reputation of the programme. Of course, all kinds of groups would benefit from leadership development opportunities—those who lead in the middle tier, middle leaders in schools, senior leaders in schools, new principals, and serving principals. But if funding is tight, selective high-quality programmes focusing on aspirant principals, implemented over a

ten-year period, are likely to be the most effective use of government funding on leadership development.

3 WHAT KIND OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT SHOULD BE PROVIDED?

There is an interesting debate taking place internationally as to how much the focus of a leadership programme should be about domain-specific knowledge (e.g., school improvement expertise, pedagogy, developing an appropriate curriculum) and how much should be about more generic leadership skills. I welcome the greater focus on domain-specific aspects of school leadership development. I think it is entirely appropriate that leadership development programs should help to equip school leaders and aspirant school leaders to be more effective at leading school improvement. We know from the excellent work of Viviane Robinson (Robinson, **2011**) that leaders who focus more on improving teaching and learning and supporting the professional development of teachers are likely to have a more positive impact on student outcomes. As we prepare our students for the future challenges of a diverse, mobile and changing society, it makes sense that leadership development programmes should focus on how leaders can support their teachers to have the most helpful interactions with students. This has not always been the case and I welcome this new emphasis. We are not leading in a vacuum. Context-specific problem-solving is key to effective leadership and it is important that leadership development programs focus on this.

Nonetheless, I think it is a mistake to go too far the other way; to dismiss generic leadership skills and competencies as either irrelevant, unteachable or no more than re-enforcing the existing traits and personalities of leaders. Leadership skills such as chairing a meeting effectively; providing supportive and challenging feedback to colleagues; building trust in a team; holding difficult conversations with colleagues who are not behaving or performing well; communicating to large groups; these are all important aspects of leadership. It is my experience that—far from these being just about the kind of person that you are—these are all skills that can be observed in others, practiced in a reflective way and deliberately improved upon. It is also my experience that, although domain-specific, these skills can be applied, with some nuance, in different contexts.

A mix of domain-specific knowledge combined with a focus on the development of more general leadership skills seems to be appropriate. The ability to use domain-specific analysis for understanding why a school is struggling to teach its students well, is a real leadership skill. So is knowing how to help people to change and how to take the organisation on that learning journey. We need to know **what** to change and **how** to change it. School leaders with weak knowledge of school improvement who don't know what great teaching and learning, or what a great curriculum looks like, are likely to be ineffective.

So are school leaders who, in spite of their expert knowledge, lack the ability to create a trusting environment or to persuade others to move forward.

4 HOW SHOULD LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT BE CARRIED OUT?

In my view, we need to be realistic about what a leadership programme can and cannot do. When I was Chief Executive Officer of The National College for School Leadership in England, we took the view that there were five main ingredients to an effective leadership programme:

1. We learn to be leaders not so much by going on a leadership programme but by being given a chance to lead. The focus for development should therefore be on **work-based learning** .
2. Work-based learning alone is not enough. There is a crucial need for **access to credible peers, mentors or line-managers** who can provide regular and constructive feedback on our leadership practice.
3. Even those first two aspects combined may not be enough, as we might find ourselves in a poor school surrounded by mediocre leadership practice, which may lower aspirations. We need to be **exposed to outstanding leadership in other contexts** and to observe different approaches to leadership in order to raise our aspirations and to help to develop our own leadership style and ways of working.
4. In addition, there is an important need to learn from evidence and international research on leadership. Access to **high quality learning resources** , that draw on evidence and research, is therefore extremely important.
5. Finally, it is necessary to have **time for reflection and discussion** with other colleagues, as Heifetz and Linsky say, we need to spend time on the balcony as well as on the dance floor (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

This focus on place-based leadership development and on leadership learning in context is now more common in many education systems around the world. Attending lectures and workshops can help with the knowledge and expertise aspect of leadership development; but in order to be effective, it needs to be combined with other work-based approaches. Increasingly, technology is enabling place-based leadership development to become a reality without requiring long journeys. This also reinforces the important point that leaders need to connect with their local community.

Finally, we need to consider how we will know if the funding on leadership development is being spent well. It is important for governments investing public money in leadership development to know if this is a better use of funding than other education priorities such as initial teacher training, smaller classes or other alternatives. It is therefore essential to build evaluative processes from the outset into our leadership development initiative. Of course, we will need to look for evidence of greater improvement in examination results in those schools where leaders have engaged with the program compared to other schools—once contextual factors have been considered—but this can be dangerous as the only indicator. Sometimes it can take a few years before leaders in schools can have a positive impact on

student outcomes. Those leaders who achieve quick wins in terms of examination results do not always lead sustainable improvement in the long-term. We also need to consider other indicators such as changes in staff morale and in student morale; whether the school grows and develops more leaders than equivalent schools; whether colleagues report positively on an improvement in leadership; whether confidence in the school from the community and from the district or region is greater in schools where the principal has been through the programme and whether the school continues to improve even after the principal has left and gone elsewhere.

5 CONCLUSION

1. The quality of leadership improves faster when leaders learn from, and with, other leaders and test out what they are learning in real work-contexts. Leadership programmes have their place. Access to high quality, evidence-based research is important. However, a quality-assured leadership-development-model based on in-work learning and coaching is more effective than simply attending external courses.
2. A new emphasis on domain-specific leadership and a focus in leadership development programmes on expertise in school improvement and curriculum development is to be welcomed. Even so, we should be wary of ignoring the importance of more general leadership skills. We need both.
3. No system that is determined to improve education outcomes should ignore school leadership development and just hope for the best. But policy-makers should be wary of looking for quick wins on leadership development; they need to think long-term and at scale. Significant improvement in an education system is highly unlikely to happen without strategic and sustained investment in the development of school leaders.

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