

The leadership imperative: Designing systemic approaches to school leadership development

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Introduction

Education systems globally acknowledge the need for more leaders, and the need to support current leaders to more effectively improve learning and lead complex change. The past decade has seen a growing focus on education leadership in many jurisdictions around the world (OECD, 2008a; 2008b; Harris and Jones, 2015; UNESCO, 2016). Yet whilst there has been interest in leadership development policies, this potential is still under-realised across the vast majority of educational jurisdictions. In some systems, leadership policies are still overlooked and underfunded. In other jurisdictions, there is an increasing amount of energy and focus being placed in myriad programs and courses but there is a lack of coherence and impact.

My aim in this paper is to support and accelerate efforts to design, or refine,

systemic approaches to school leadership development across a jurisdiction. I begin by outlining the case for a renewed focus on, and investment in, leadership development as a policy priority. I then unpack five key elements that can shape the design.

- Element 1 – pursue a coherent system-wide approach
- Element 2 – look beyond principal preparation
- Element 3 – prioritise the capacity to lead teacher learning
- Element 4 – value embedded leadership experiences
- Element 5 – partner with the profession

I conclude with guidance on practical next steps for system leaders.

The leadership imperative: The case for investing in leadership development

There are three key ideas that are motivating system-level leaders to place new focus and investment in leadership development policies and strategies.

First, the need to improve learner outcomes

Historic changes in our societies, economies and environment mean that all jurisdictions are under pressure to raise levels of student learning. Numerous syntheses of empirical studies have identified a link between quality leadership practices and student learning outcomes (Hallinger, 2010; Leithwood and Seashore-Louis, 2011; Marzano, Waters and McNulty 2005; Robinson, 2011). According to a meta-analysis of factors impacting on student learning outcomes, school leaders and their teams are second in impact to teaching quality (Hattie, 2008). The International Successful School Principals Project¹ draws similar conclusions. This project is a collaboration among eight international jurisdictions to identify the features and impacts of effective school leadership. Their mixed methods research illustrates how leadership influences the organisation, culture and capabilities of schools and teachers (Day et al, 2009; Day, Gu and Sammons, 2016).

Second, the challenge of effective local implementation

Trying to raise learning outcomes from an education ministry or a central government department is difficult and often frustrating, due to the distance from the frontline of the classroom. Strategies such as the promotion of evidence-informed practices are dependent on the

quality of leadership within each school (Louis and Robinson, 2012). Through decades of well-intentioned top-down reform, system leaders have learnt that no policy, no matter how well designed, can be effective without high-quality implementation led at the local level (Durlak and DuPre, 2008; Elmore, 1979). Qualitative research studies in schools indicate that leadership can influence the quality of implementation in many different ways. One very important aspect is how leaders communicate a system policy to their teams, shaping how others make sense of it (Coburn, 2005; Tuytens and Devos, 2010). Leaders also influence the site-based reception of a new policy or directive; schools with a strong culture of trust are much more capable of responding well and achieving improvements (Bryk et al, 2010)

Third, the increasing levels of school autonomy

School leadership is becoming even more important, as the structure of education decision making changes (Earley and Greany, 2017, p 1–6; Schleicher, 2012). In many education jurisdictions around the world, schools are being given greater autonomy (Woessmann, Luedemann, Schuetz and West, 2009), with the result that, to varying degrees across jurisdictions, school leadership teams are making key decisions about improvement strategies; recruiting and developing staff; designing and adapting curriculum; and effectively allocating resources (Schleicher, 2012, p 15–17) – but school autonomy as a policy is not equally effective across all contexts and relies on strong teacher and leader capabilities (Hanushek, Link and Woessmann, 2013). Effective leaders of learning can act more strategically when they have control over whom they hire, how they design the curriculum, and how

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they allocate their professional learning budgets (Caldwell and Spinks, 2013, p 134–163).

Many educational jurisdictions are now exploring new policies and strategies, to make leadership development a core focus for further system-wide improvement and innovation. Systemic approaches are required to focus the surge of new activity, in the area of leadership development, into impact. Some jurisdictions have instigated strategies that include creating national or system-wide standards for leadership development or working on building a ‘pipeline’ of future principals through certification and training programs. However, many questions remain about the focus, content, location and efficacy of actual leadership development strategies. It is unclear to what extent current development activities are designed in ways that actually impact leaders’ daily practice, and connect to student outcomes.

In the next sections I outline 5 key elements to consider when approaching the design and implementation of a systemic approach to school leadership development.

Five key elements

Element 1. Pursue a coherent system-wide approach

Leadership development policies need to be considered in relation to the rest of the education system, and as an integral part of other key policy drivers. Even the best-designed leadership policies cannot produce leaders who can be effective on their own. To have genuine and sustained impact, leadership needs to operate in a supportive and enabling policy environment and system architecture. Leadership development strategies must

be coupled with aligned policies in resourcing, accountability and governance policies that provide support and motivate leaders to do the work they are being developed to do.

Attempts to improve system performance purely by increasing the capacities of leaders, without also attending to the broader policy context in which this leadership is enacted, are likely to have disappointing outcomes. Of particular importance will be the design of school accountabilities systems. Leaders respond in their behaviour to what they perceive is rewarded in the system. If there is a culture of compliance and leaders receive recognition for making surface changes, there is little incentive to really focus on impacting student outcomes. The biggest incentives in evaluation and accountability policies influencing leaders should be attached to demonstrating long-term and sustained impact. This is more likely to encourage leaders to work on the difficult but important work of building teacher capacity, improving cultures of learning, and deepening student engagement and belonging in schools.

There are no generic international ‘plug and play’ solutions that apply across diverse school systems. Jurisdictions across the world have unique conditions and face a wide array of specific challenges. System leaders should adopt a design-led approach for creating a system-wide approach to creating an effective leadership strategy that is aligned with the jurisdiction’s specific policy architecture, conditions and purpose. The message to systems here is simple: Learn from and be inspired by international experience, but design leadership development approaches that are relevant for your unique educational context.

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Element 2. Look beyond principal preparation

Leadership policy should not be restricted to the specific roles of principals or school administrators; rather, it should be focused on developing leadership capabilities and practices of multiple actors across a school. Leadership policies should be designed to encompass all those who support the development of teacher practice, team and organisational culture, and the progress of all students in learning. When leadership policies focus too much on the school principal, that individual can quickly become a bottleneck on efforts to innovate practice and improve learning for all students (Bangs and Frost, 2015). While roles and titles are important for endowing authority, it is more important that educators master the effective use of leadership practices that positively influence the quality of teaching and learning.

Growing the pool of individuals who consider themselves potential leaders is a crucial step in creating a leadership for learning system at all levels. I call this *activating leadership potential*. System leaders should consider how schools can offer more educators the opportunity to adopt the identity of a leader, and pursue the practices of leadership of learning.

Developing the identity and skills of teacher leaders and middle leaders can create more points of support for school improvement and change agendas (Buck, 2016). Teacher leaders often have close relationships with their colleagues and can influence change through embedded practice support in classrooms and informal conversations in the staffroom. Sometimes, middle leaders may be best placed to lead a pedagogical reform or redesign, because they have the most granular knowledge of specific subject areas. There is strong evidence that

where schools are joined together – in a municipality, district or network – middle leaders or instructional coaches who move between various environments play a key role in spreading new knowledge and skills as part of larger improvement and change efforts (Matthews et al, 2011; Spillane, Parise and Sherer, 2011).

Teacher leadership has recently gained significant traction across the profession in many jurisdictions. A good example of new opportunities for those educators leading from the classroom level is the Ontario Teacher Learning and Leadership Program.² The TLLP is an annual initiative supporting teachers to initiate and lead projects in curriculum or pedagogical development. Teachers wishing to apply to the program submit proposals for teacher-led projects, which receive funding from the Ontario Ministry of Education. Teachers can submit proposals individually, or as a team. The key marker of a successful project is that it must offer some way to develop the practice of other teachers.

To truly increase the teaching and learning capacity of a school, more people need to have the knowledge, judgment and skills required to shape and guide improvements in teaching and learning. Schools cannot deliver a full range of education outcomes for diverse learners under the direction of a single individual, no matter how capable.

Element 3. Prioritise the capacity to lead teacher learning

To underpin a leadership development framework, jurisdictions need to shift from a focus on leadership credentials, or years of experience, toward a focus on individuals' capabilities, and what they are able to do with their knowledge. The ability to improve teacher capacity, both individually and collectively, is the core capability of a leader of learning, whether a school principal, a middle or teacher leader.

The focus of leadership policies should be to equip leaders with the practices and priorities to develop teacher capabilities, so that teachers can promote student learning more effectively. A review of the best evidence on school leader practices found that promoting and participating in professional learning with staff has the largest impact on student outcomes of the set of practices analysed (Robinson et al, 2009).

Dylan Wiliam has also recently focused on leading teacher learning as the key capability of effective school leaders (Wiliam, 2016). He emphasises that leading teacher learning involves designing learning both for knowledge acquisition and for behaviour change.

To support teachers to continually enhance their teaching practices, leaders require an understanding of how to design and lead professional learning approaches that can have a positive impact on student outcomes (CUREE, 2011; Learning Forward, 2011; Timperley et al, 2007; Wei et al, 2009).

Leaders of learning need to place a particular emphasis on what the research suggests about the forms of professional learning that can improve professional practices and lift student outcomes. A common finding in the literature is that leaders can build teacher capabilities by engaging teachers in an ongoing inquiry into the impact of their teaching on student learning. Leaders must create an environment of ‘supportive accountability’: creating the time, tools, supports and safety for teachers to try out new things in their practice, while keeping a rigorous focus on observing the impact of practice on student learning (Wiliam, 2016, p 177–184).

Leaders should not only be equipped to focus on building individual teacher capabilities, but also on developing

collective capacity; collaborative expertise and a sense of collective efficacy (Donohoo, 2017; Goddard, Hoy and Hoy, 2004). There are substantial benefits to teachers feeling that they are part of a strong team. As a group, the team has professional capital: the added value that arises from working with and alongside other experts (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). Moreover, their sense of collective efficacy is motivating and sustains hard work over long periods of time (Rew, 2013). Levels of collective efficacy in a school are significant predictors of positive student outcomes (Goddard, Hoy and Hoy, 2000). A school’s teachers experience collective efficacy when they are conscious of a shared belief that together they can have a positive impact on the learning of all their students. Leaders play a key role in creating collective efficacy by shaping opportunities for teams to have impact and helping them see when and how that impact is occurring.

In leading teacher learning, the goal for leaders should be to build a culture of collaborative professionalism that cultivates both individual and collective efficacy (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). Collaborative professionalism refers to a culture in which teachers are continuously working with each other to learn and improve the learning of their students. This culture is therefore a step beyond professional development that merely ‘happens to’ teachers periodically; it is instead a culture of consistent, day-to-day engagement. Teachers feel responsible to each other, are engaged together in ongoing learning to continuously improve practice, and can see each other as valuable resources of knowledge and learning (Fullan and Hargreaves, 2016; Hargreaves and O’Connor, 2017).

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Element 4. Value embedded leadership experiences

Developing leadership expertise requires time, practice in context and feedback to develop, and thus to be successful, all development initiatives need to be aligned with the principles of effective adult learning (Snook, Nohria and Khurana, 2011). System leaders need to shift from thinking in terms of one-off leadership preparation programs towards designing approaches to leadership development that are ongoing and job-embedded. Whilst capstone programs and courses may have a role, it will be important to broaden leadership development opportunities to include and value what happens in real-world contexts.

Embedded learning is designed to support participants in practising their skills in the daily ‘people work’ of schools. Studies of how individuals develop expertise highlight the vital importance of practice – but most importantly, of deliberate practice (Deans for Impact, 2016; Ericsson, Nandagopal and Roring, 2009). Deliberate practice takes place where individuals receive feedback and revise what they are doing each time they try out a skill. Repeating the same mistakes does not lead to improvement. Getting precise feedback helps leaders to modify their actions and improve. In addition, peers are an important source of advice and feedback found within daily work. Learning from peers may be one of the most useful forms of learning that leaders have, as it provides them with contextualised knowledge and insight based on experience.

The most powerful leadership learning can often occur in the context of problem-solving challenges. Projects or challenges need to focus on the core work of leadership of learning: raising teacher capacity and

student outcomes (Ng, 2015). There are two types of challenges leaders might engage in as part of a structured experiential learning program:

- the challenge of their own workplace, where they are applying new knowledge and skills within the community and organisation they will continue to work in, and thus practising their new skills and knowledge while also adapting them to that specific context; and
- the challenge of a similar workplace but one that affords them a different perspective on their work. For example, an aspiring principal might have to complete a placement in both an excellent school and a school that is struggling.

Each type of experience has advantages. In the first case, participants have a chance to practise their new knowledge and skills in a context with which they are familiar, and also make adaptations that may improve their ability to impact that specific organisation. In the second case, entering a new environment, a participant can practice applying knowledge and skills but the experience also fulfils a range of other purposes. These include

- ensuring that leaders who are going to be qualified are prepared to work in diverse settings;
- learning from and gaining ideas from a different organisation or environment; and
- making it easier for them to abstract their existing tacit knowledge by having to apply their leadership skills in a new context.

A good example of leadership development designed around these principles is the Leaders in Education Program run by the National Institute of Education in

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Singapore. As with the other programs offered by the institute, it requires participants to complete an extended, school-based project of implementing a curricular or pedagogical change in a different school context (Ng, 2015).

For deeper levels of formation and development, leaders also need time to step back and reflect on their context, and the systems and culture in their school. These are the features of leadership development that allow for deep ‘double loop’ learning and the development of a capacity for reflection and growth (Argyris, 1976, 1993). In single learning loops, leaders identify emergent problems, work on them, and look for signs of desired results. In double loop learning, rather than working only on problems as they are presented, leaders consider how they may need to reframe a situation, problem or desirable goal in order to make real and lasting improvement. Double loop learning is particularly important when confronting complex, opaque problems, or in periods when goals are shifting.

Traditionally, research into effective leadership has focused on what leaders know and can do. More recent thinking on leadership highlights the importance of individuals identifying *who they are*, their sense of self, identity and how they communicate that to others. Leadership theorists describe this as ‘identity work’; in order to transition from the role of teacher to that of leader – providing direction, guidance and support – individuals have to undergo a shift in the way they think about themselves and their confidence in their skills and abilities (Ibarra et al, 2014).

The broader leadership literature highlights how developing a strong sense of self requires a careful balance. It is important for aspiring leaders to understand how their

beliefs are shaped by their own experiences and to be open to changing their beliefs if new experiences or perspectives call for it (Khurana and Snook, 2011). Learning to be a leader is therefore in part about being able to let go of things that might hold you back from being effective in a particular context or task. This ability to scrutinise and evaluate one’s own perspectives is often called ‘reflexivity’, or what adult development theorist Robert Kegan describes as developing a ‘self-authoring’ perspective (Kegan, 1982, 1998).

Element 5. Partner with the profession

In refining, shaping or implementing a leadership development strategy, government and system leaders must partner with the education profession. Leadership development is not something that can be ‘done to’ the profession. Successful approaches will need to involve deep partnership and co-creation with educators, as they are the ones who must own and drive ongoing leadership development.

Government or district initiatives will not be seen as credible by frontline educators, unless the expertise that already exists within the profession is taken seriously. The expertise to understand what effective leadership looks like, and how it can be developed, is located primarily within the education profession, not within government. System leaders should work closely with teacher organisations, principal associations and other professional bodies within their jurisdiction, to garner feedback on and co-design policies and approaches. Deep consultation is required with the profession, in order to gain a shared view of how leadership is best developed, and how compelling pathways can be defined.

Research into the current state of educational leadership indicates that many systems are struggling with a shortage of school leaders, but also that current leaders have room to develop as more effective leaders of learning.

Creating leadership capacity at scale takes time. Professional bodies can foster a body of knowledge and practice expertise that can be embedded over time, and sits outside of political cycles. One example of the benefit of this approach is found in Canada. Teachers' and principals' associations in Canada have a growing tradition of working closely with the provincial ministries, despite industrial disputes. In Alberta, the Ministry of Education has worked closely with the Alberta Teachers' Association, which includes both teachers and school leaders, in order to design standards for school leaders and plan continual professional development for school leaders. In Ontario, the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) is in ongoing and continual partnership with the Ministry in its engagement about the development of principals and vice-principals. Since the early 2000s, the professional associations have been the main providers of qualification certificates. Developing leadership must go beyond a series of small-scale programs and courses, and move toward a career-long growth of individual and collective leadership practices, much of which will be embedded within the daily work of schools. To be successful, this type of work will need to be co-designed and led by the profession itself, as it sets and upholds standards of practice and works to use existing capacity to build the capacity of future leaders.

Conclusion

School leadership policies are key to improving the quality of teaching and learning, and ensuring effective implementation within diverse local contexts. Research into the current state of educational leadership indicates that many systems are struggling with a shortage of school leaders, but also that current leaders have room to develop as more effective leaders of learning. Despite a flurry of activity in the area of leadership development, there remain few examples of coherent systemic approaches to leadership development policies.

In this paper I have focused on systemic leadership development strategies, designed to cultivate leadership for learning capabilities across an education system. For leadership to play this catalysing role, system leaders need to home in on the outlined 5 key aspects of a leadership strategy. By pursuing a system-wide approach, system leaders can attend to the need to create the architecture for the development of school leadership capacity, as well as the enabling policy conditions for this leadership to be enacted for impact.

Looking beyond principal preparation supports the development of leadership capacity at all levels of the school. Prioritising the capacity to lead teacher learning places the building of individual and collective teacher capacity right at

the centre of the work worth doing for leaders. In order to support leaders to have the capacity to build the capacity of others, they will need to build their own adaptive leadership expertise through embedded real-world contexts for learning. Lastly, a commitment to partnering with the profession supports a sustainable approach, where standards or certifications are not merely enforced as a matter of compliance, but owned, led and upheld by members of the profession themselves.

As systems take the next steps in leadership policy formulation and implementation, it will be important to start small, evaluate and expand – investigating the reception to and impact of efforts, and being willing to adjust and learn as they create contextually relevant and compelling approaches, which can have the intended impact for leaders and the learners that they serve.

Endnotes

1. www.uv.uio.no/ils/english/research/projects/isspp/.
2. www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teacher/tllp.html.

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Additional reading

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Simon Breakspear

About the Author

Dr Simon Breakspear is a Research Fellow at the Asia Pacific Centre for Leadership and Change, The Education University of Hong Kong. He is Founder and Executive Director of Agile Schools Pty Ltd.

About the Paper

This paper has been developed from some core ideas published for a recent WISE Qatar project (Breakspear, S L, Peterson, A, Alfadala, A and Khair, M S (2017) *Developing Agile Leaders of Learning: School Leadership Policy for Dynamic Times*). The author's aim in this CSE paper is to support and accelerate efforts to design, or refine, systemic approaches to school leadership development across a jurisdiction. He outlines the case for a renewed focus on, and investment in, leadership development as a policy priority, and then unpacks five key elements that can shape the design. He concludes with guidance on practical next steps for system leaders.

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