



Forde, C. and Torrance, D. (2021) Leadership at all levels: system alignment through empowerment in Scottish education? *School Leadership and Management*, 41(1-2), pp. 22-40. (doi: [10.1080/13632434.2020.1825372](https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2020.1825372))

The material cannot be used for any other purpose without further permission of the publisher and is for private use only.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/223936/>

Deposited on 13 October 2020

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of
Glasgow

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

Leadership at all Levels: System Alignment through Empowerment in Scottish Education?

Christine Forde and Deirdre Torrance, University of Glasgow

Abstract

This article examines the policy construction of 'leadership at all levels' in Scottish education. In the current reforms 'leadership at all levels' is being used to mobilise support around changes to the role of the headteacher and of the local authorities (LAs) to bring about greater system alignment. From a critical policy analysis six themes are reported on: (1) Social Justice Ideology and the Equity Agenda – Perception Versus Reality?; (2) Mobilising Support for Reform - Managing Perceptions of the Public?; (3) Mobilising Support for New Governance - Managing Perceptions of the Teaching Profession?; (4) Mobilising Support for Restructuring - Managing the Middle Tier?; (5) Mobilising Support for Empowerment and Collaboration - Leadership at all Levels?; (6) Policy Rhetoric Versus Practice Realities - System Alignment through Empowerment?

Introduction

Scottish education has embarked on a reform programme around the issues of empowerment and governance (Scottish Government 2018a) looking to bring about systemic improvement to further the closing of a poverty-related attainment gap. Bell and Stevenson (2015, 147) argue that 'education policy is based on the political ideologies that shape those objectives which frame much of what happens in individual educational institutions'. However, the scope of the reform programme in Scotland is wider, using policy to mobilise support through 'leadership at all levels' across the education system and communities. In this article, we examine this policy construction of 'leadership at all levels', drawing from a critical policy analysis (Young and Diem 2015). Jones (2015) proposes that seeing policy in terms of text is problematic, given the various social processes which shape the implementation of policy. Nevertheless, the generation of a policy text is a process of encoding political ideas (Trowler 1998) and so the critical analysis of such texts is a means of examining current policy intentions. Given the intensity of policy activity, it would be difficult to record in detail the current reform programme. Instead, we use one of Young and Diem's (2015, 5) five approaches, 'the difference between policy rhetoric and practice reality', to

explore the emerging issues and surface the taken-for-granted assumptions of this set of policies.

Using the OECD (2015) report as a pivotal juncture, documents produced by the Scottish Government and the inspectorate were gathered, analysed and coded (Miles and Huberman 1994), initially examining the idea of 'leadership at all levels' and from this, related concepts of improvement, governance, empowerment and collaboration. These documents included consultations, policy proposals, plans, reviews and thematic inspection reports related the reform of education governance through empowerment of teachers, schools and their communities. From the policy analysis of 'leadership at all levels', this article provides a critical commentary on six emerging themes around system alignment through 'the empowerment agenda' in Scottish education: (1) Social Justice Ideology and the Equity Agenda – Perception Versus Reality?; (2) Mobilising Support for Reform - Managing Perceptions of the Public?; (3) Mobilising Support for New Governance - Managing Perceptions of the Teaching Profession?; (4) Mobilising Support for Restructuring - Managing the Middle Tier?; (5) Mobilising Support for Empowerment and Collaboration - Leadership at all Levels?; (6) Policy Rhetoric Versus Practice Realities - System Alignment through Empowerment?

The original paper was commissioned for the BELMAS Review of Educational Leadership and Administration in the United Kingdom and was presented at the Scottish conference, April 2018. At that point the reform programme was being launched and it was the Scottish Government's intention to use legislation to implement these reforms. Since then, *Education Reform - Joint Agreement* (Scottish Government 2018a) committed central and local government to the reform programme. These ongoing developments have been reflected in the 2020 reworking of this article.

Social Justice Ideology and the Equity Agenda – Perception Versus Reality?

In Scotland, there is a national belief in the potential of education to provide opportunities for the advancement and empowerment of all, regardless of their background. And so it goes, that those from disadvantaged backgrounds – a lad o' pairts – are able to forge a new destiny, through engagement with the great leveller of publicly funded comprehensive education. This

forms an integral part of Scottish culture and identity, supporting the status quo of education policy through successive administrations.

Donald Dewar set out a vision for the first administration: *Social Justice... A Scotland Where Everyone Matters* (Scottish Executive 1999). This seminal policy exemplified one of the ways in which policy ideas are transferred across an education system: by naming the problem (Bacchi 2012). Following the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and shortly after the election of New Labour, the report spotlights a ‘rising tide of poverty’, an ‘obscene cycle of deprivation’ and an ‘appalling inheritance’ (Scottish Executive 1999, 4-5). The political answer to such societal issues saw an enhanced commitment to comprehensive education, including the protection of education budgets compared to other public sector services to take forward various improvement initiatives. In the words of the Scottish Government (2016d, 8), Scottish education has ‘an impressive track record of improvement and reforms’, including reforms to the curriculum and assessment (Scottish Executive 2004), quality assurance and inspection, (HMIe 2006), career-long teacher education (incorporating leadership development) (Donaldson 2011) and now ‘the empowerment agenda’ (Scottish Government 2016a), the current reform programme designed to create a teacher and school-led system to bring about improved pupil learning outcomes.

While there has a wide range of initiatives, the problem being named and associated targets remain largely the same. The targets in 1999 included safeguarding overall attainment in reading, writing and mathematics for all primary pupils, raising achievement with a specific commitment to raising the attainment ‘of the poorest-performing 20%’ (Scottish Executive 1999, 10-11). In 2020 with the addition of health and well-being, it is the same broad areas, just different terms.

Table 1: Social Justice: Milestones and Targets

<i>Social Justice... A Scotland Where Everyone Matters</i>	<i>Achieving Excellence and Equity 2020 NIF and Improvement Plan</i>
- Increasing the proportions of our children who attain the appropriate levels in reading, writing and maths by the end of Primary 2 & Primary 7;	- Improvement in attainment, particularly in literacy and numeracy ;

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Halving the proportion of 16-19 year olds who are not in education, training or employment.; - Bringing the poorest-performing 20% of pupils, in terms of Standard Grade achievement, closer to the performance of all pupils. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people; - Improvement in children and young people’s health and wellbeing; - Improvement in employability skills and sustained, positive school-leaver destinations for all young people;
---	--

In their *National Performance Framework*, the current Government declares their central purpose is ‘to create a more successful country with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth’ (Scottish Government 2016b, 3). This purpose underpins the two aims of Scottish education policy: ‘Excellence through attainment’ and ‘Achieving equity’ (Scottish Government 2016c), highlighting the political significance of education and system-level improvement in a competitive global market. The means to realise the two aims of Scottish education is through the concerted and cohesive exercise of leadership at all levels of the education system, to take forward the programme of reforms around ‘governance and empowerment’.

The OECD Report (2015, 10) observes that: ‘There has been a decade of patient work to put in place the full curriculum programme’. However, Scottish education has not seen the significant improvements around international comparators envisaged to bring about system-wide change (Scottish Government 2019a). The harsh reality is that despite laudable claims, the ‘appalling inheritance of poverty’ highlighted by Dewar (Scottish Executive 1999, 5) remains the named policy problem some twenty years later. Beyond the rhetoric, real issues around poverty and marginalisation - with the corresponding poverty-related attainment gap - have significant consequences for schools working to address the needs of increasingly diverse groups of learners.

Mobilising Support for Reform - Managing Perceptions of the Public?

The policy analysis highlighted the importance of tapping into widely accepted views of the role of public education in Scotland to build support for this reform programme across the

teaching profession, local government and stakeholders. Alongside the distinctive features of Scottish education policy with its emphasis on equity and social justice, with a firm belief of the power of education to raise children out of poverty towards a brighter future, there is a long-held perception in Scotland of the high quality of its education system. This enduring commitment to public education forms part of the wider Scottish democratic tradition. Indeed, John Swinney (Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education), draws from this discourse: ‘Scotland pioneered publicly-funded comprehensive school education for all and the Scottish Government remains absolutely committed to this’ (Scottish Government 2016a, 1).

In the current reform programme, there is a sense of impatience about the lack of progress, with a discourse about responsibilities and strong action to achieve improvement. Nicola Sturgeon, the current First Minister, declared that: ‘My aim—to put it bluntly—is to close that attainment gap completely. [...] its existence is more than just an economic and social challenge for us all. It is a moral challenge. [...] it goes to the very heart of who we are and how we see ourselves as a country’ (Sturgeon 2015, online). The stakes are high. The improvement of publicly funded comprehensive education (which forms 95% of education provision in Scotland) is positioned as central to Scottish identity.

In mobilising support for such reform, Scottish policy players are skilled in managing the perceptions of the public. Little wonder then, that an important element of Scottish Government policy is the mobilisation of discourse (Arnott and Ozga 2016) as part of the process of governing. Unsurprisingly, alignment of all the components of an education system underpins the National Improvement Framework (NIF) (Scottish Government 2016b) with the First Minister declaring that she wants to be absolutely clear about what, ‘collectively, we want to deliver for Scotland’s children’ (Scottish Government 2015, 2). This softens the edge of a targeted approach to a national attainment improvement strategy with the First Minister’s commitment to raising standards: ‘we need to know much more, on a consistent and systematic basis, about the performance of our education system’ (*ibid.*). The current policy imperative around a flourishing Scotland (Scottish Government 2016b) places the performance of the education system under the spotlight, without the political will to risk losing public confidence through denouncing (the myth of) the quality of Scottish education.

Alignment through the NIF is the way of ensuring that the components of the systems fit together and are held to account, within a mobilisation of discourse around a collective national endeavour. The wider discourse around public education, democratic traditions and fairness in Scottish education is clearly drawn from, in building support for this reform programme.

Mobilising Support for New Governance - Managing Perceptions of the Teaching Profession?

There are factors that limit opportunities for the radical restructuring of education governance in Scotland. These factors relate partly to the public commitment to comprehensive public education and partly to the longstanding approach to policy development. The forming and adopting of policy occurs through discussions with stakeholder representation, including local government, with the building of consensus leading to a final agreed policy. While this approach circumvents wide ideological differences, the ensuring lack of critique also potentially limits the scope of change as the different groups work to protect their interests.

In this drive for system-wide improvement, however, central government has become increasingly directive, centralized and target setting. Words like drive, relentless, determined, strong and decisive pepper policy documents. What we see is a marshalling of the different components of the education system to achieve improvement, setting out the roles and expectations of all parties (Scottish Government 2017a). Attention has moved from the previous focus on improving and expanding leadership capability and capacity in schools to more closely directing the processes of leadership through structural/technical realignment (Looney, 2011). On the one hand, the reform programme is about empowerment to give scope to the exercise of leadership at all levels. However, on the other hand, essentially this reform programme is about managing the way in which these three levels interact with one another: central government, national agencies and bodies, local government and schools.

Ball (2003) highlights the paradoxical nature of reforms where there has been a seeming increase in autonomy while at the same time an increase in accountability. In Scotland, the desire on the part of the government to direct policy, practice and accountability thereby,

lessening the long established influential, gatekeeping role of local authorities (LAs) compounds this effect. Shamir (2008) argues that in new forms of governance, there is a move away from expectations of obedience and compliance to responsabilisation. Responsibilisation occurs when an individual actor in a system decides on and pursues a course of action with the corresponding consequences of the outcomes of this act lying solely with the individual. Ball (2003, 217-218) proposes that such changes are fundamentally altering both what it means to be a teacher and the practice of teachers: by creating 'new identities, new forms of interaction and new values'. Keddie (2015, 1201) illustrates a similar process in relation to the 'new kinds of headteachers' to be found in English academy trusts where the trust is 'responsibilising of headteachers around its philanthropic agenda and business principles'. These headteachers represent 'self-determined autonomous subject, freely accepting of, and taking individual responsibility for, raising their school's attainment' (1201). However, there remain issues related to the recruitment and retention of headteachers in Scotland.

The issue of the image of headship and the perceptions of teachers about the intense demands of the role formed a key finding of the comprehensive study of headteacher recruitment and retention in Scotland (Macbeath et al. 2009). This study also investigated why suitably qualified and experienced deputy headteachers chose not to move into headship. The findings highlighted the way in which the perceived demands of the role of headteacher was a factor in the decision of these deputy headteachers. There was a reluctance to have 'ultimate responsibility' and so distance themselves from what they regard as the core purpose behind their reasons for coming into teaching – to work with children and young people (Forde and Lowden 2016). This chimed with the frustrations expressed by many serving headteachers. Whilst reporting a sense of fulfilment they gained from being able to make a difference to the learning of young people, the persistent administrative demands prevented headteachers from the engaging with teaching and learning, critical in the pursuance of the current improvement agenda. This reluctance for suitably qualified and experienced teachers to come forward into headship is complex. Watson (2007) points to substantial evidence of responsibilities expanding and accountabilities intensifying, especially around pupil performance. Lynch and Worth (2017, 40) also note various factors which seem to contribute to this fall in retention around accountability and 'system instability', the pace

and nature of policy change. Therefore, building support across the profession especially for ongoing changes to the role of the headteacher, is critical.

Given the issues associated with headteacher retention and recruitment, support for this reform programme has been mobilised by underlining the positive elements of the changes to the headteacher role. The *Headteachers' Charter* forms 'the epicentre in many ways of the reform of the whole education system' (Scottish Government 2017c, 27). This charter is the means to 'provide headteachers and schools with autonomy and flexibility to ensure local decisions are, wherever possible made as close to the learner as possible' (2019a, 5). While the *Headteachers' Charter* might be conceived of as a process of empowerment, it is also clearly a process of responsabilisation. The *Joint Agreement* (Scottish Government 2018a) lists the responsibilities of headteachers related to curriculum, improvement, staffing and funding and central to this is the task of empowering 'staff to continually improve practice' (Scottish Government 2019b, 16). To balance this extension of responsibilities and to make the charter attractive, headteachers can look to 'a revolutionised offer of support and improvement' (Scottish Government 2017a, 10).

It is, then, the individual headteacher who is at the sharp end of responsabilisation. As such, efforts to redefine what it means to be a headteacher through a process of responsabilisation could put at risk other strategies to address headteacher recruitment and stability, such as the 'Head in a New Direction' recruitment campaign and succession planning, and the Excellence in Headship professional learning programme (Scottish Government 2019b, 4).

Mobilising Support for Restructuring - Managing the Middle Tier?

Until the latest reform programme there was little exploration of governance in education in Scotland. With a limited amount of tinkering in the intervening period, the responsibilities and relationships of a three-tier system set out in the *Education (Scotland) Act 1981* (Westminster 1981) have remained stable. A distinctive feature of various education reforms programme has been the consensual nature of policy formation and adoption in Scotland, which is mindful of the status of the teaching profession and inclusive rather than adversarial.

However, the commissioning of an OECD review in 2015, *Improving Schools in Scotland*, marks a more directive political approach to improvement, a particular focus being the role of LAs in taking forward the reforms.

It might be argued that there is no desire to create conflict, or to disturb well established policy processes in Scottish education with instead, a desire to be seen to be inclusive and to maintain the Scottish democratic tradition of governance, through consultation and consensus. Despite this determination, there is a tension between governance within a context of settled relationships, and the drive for improvement by central government. A key challenge inherent in the current reforms, is how to build a more connected system where national policies flow through to directly impact on all levels in the system and at the same time, 'empowering' teachers, schools, parents, pupils and communities so that local decisions address local issues. We can see this tension through the strategies designed to direct and manage a national improvement agenda by the alignment of all components of the system to that agenda, and particularly its impact on the role of the LAs.

In the initial proposals for legislation (Scottish Government 2016a, 21), restructuring of this middle tier of LAs was deemed necessary because of: 'variability in practice and outcomes across authorities and school', variations in the way councils spend their education budget which is deemed to impact on attainment, the need 'to liberate schools from bureaucracy' and the potential offered by greater LA partnership (20-22). Support for this restructuring has been driven partly by changes to funding arrangements with targeted funding for attainment through the Scottish Attainment Challenge and the Pupil Equity Fund. These developments reflect the discussions in the OECD (2015) review which looked to a strengthened middle tier where LAs play a clear role in taking forward the improvement agenda.

In mobilising support for such radical restructuring, the skills of Scottish policy players in managing the middle tier were challenged. Having encountered significant resistance, the use of legislation to bring about change was set aside and instead a compromise position was reached. As a result of the Joint Agreement, the middle tier has been bolstered through cross-LA partnerships, the Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs), complementary to the Headteacher Charter (Scottish Government 2018a). This reconstructed middle tier is seen as

a mechanism to progress the NIF thereby binding teachers, schools and LAs to a national agenda and targets. This is a significant site of political activity.

The RICs have been subject to scrutiny since their inception with two reviews published (JSG 2017; Scottish Government 2018b), and a further review conducted in late 2019. The deeply political nature of the establishment of the RICs can be seen in the need to underline that the RICs are not another layer of accountability.

RICs are not intended to be formal bodies within the education system. They are intended to bring together LAs and Education Scotland to develop different ways of working, bring together capacity across a region and add value through collective efforts (Scottish Government 2018b, 1).

The Joint Agreement (Scottish Government 2018a) is leading to significant changes in the role of the LAs and their relationship with each other and with headteachers. Lubienski (2014, 424) argues that 'rather than simply devolving power away from meso-level authorities to local actors, many of these reforms can instead create the conditions in which new, non-state actors are able to accrue power for themselves'. Lubienski (2014, 425) describes this process of centralisation through funding, prescribed curriculum and the decentralisation 'of authority to local actors such as schools and parents' as a process of deintermediation. The reform of the middle tier in Scottish education might be conceived of as a move from government to governance and a retreat of the state from education. However, the Scottish reforms are not about radical decentralisation and disaggregation of power to non-state players but about mobilising state players, including headteachers and local authority personnel.

Initial concerns related to the leadership of a RIC and its relationship with LAs. In the initial proposal (Scottish Government 2017a, 31), the RICs would:

be led by a Regional Director, to be appointed by the Scottish Government and provide a direct line of accountability for the performance of the regional improvement collaboratives to Ministers. The Regional Director will report to the HM Chief Inspector/Chief Executive of Education Scotland.

The term ‘regional director’ might suggest a role overseeing the LAs and their directors and alongside this, was the question about reporting. These became matters for negotiation. In bold type, the following insertion stands out in the report of the Joint Steering Group (2017, 12):

Following discussions between the DFM and Cllr. McCabe on 15th and 21st September, each IC be led by a ‘Regional Improvement Lead’ (rather than a ‘Regional Director’). The Regional Improvement Lead will be selected jointly by the local authorities that make up the IC and the Chief Inspector of Education. The appointment would be made with the agreement of the Chief Executives in all the authorities and with the Scottish Government, (who would be advised by the Chief Inspector). The Regional Improvement Lead would be formally line managed by the Chief Executive of the employing authority, whilst reporting to all of the collaborating authorities and to the Chief Inspector.

The review of the RICS (Scottish Government 2018b) charting these early days highlights the beginnings of cross-boundary working and a readiness of schools to be involved in development opportunities. However, issues remain about the relationship between the RICs, schools and LAs: ‘most felt strongly that the main point of contact and support for schools should continue to be the local authority’ (ii). This middle tier is intended as a space for collaborative leadership for system-wide improvement.

Mobilising Support for Empowerment and Collaboration - Leadership at all Levels?

The policy ambition behind creating ‘an empowered system’ is designed to raise expectations and outputs through the reprofessionalisation of Scottish education. A keynote of these reforms is ‘co-operation and collaboration not competition and marketisation’ (Scottish Government 2016a, 1). The reform programme is to bring about ‘an empowered system’ which ‘grows stronger and more confident, working in partnership to lead learning and teaching that achieves excellence and equity for all learners. Empowerment and collaboration for improvement happens at all levels of the system’ (Scottish Government 2019b, 18). This is intended as a process to engage all stakeholders and pupils, parents and communities. In

this, empowerment is about ‘flexibility and autonomy’ which must be balanced with ‘the right amount of governance and accountability’ (Scottish Government 2019b, 3). Leadership at all levels is seen as the tool to achieve an empowered system.

Hudson (2007) argues that the restructuring of education in many countries with decentralisation and the removal of established structures is not about the state leaving education. Instead the state is finding new ways to regulate education. Thus, rather than this being a process of ‘deintermediation’ where ‘new configurations of schooling’ (Simkins et al. 2014, 2) are established, this is re-intermediation where that mediating layer between schools and central government is reconstructed to reinforce collective responsibility for the national improvement agenda. In the case of Scottish education, these reforms are not about ‘removing the spokes that tie the hub to the tyre’ (Lubienski 2014, 425) but about tying the spokes and the tyre even more securely to hub. The binding harnessed, is through the affirmation of leadership at all levels.

Leadership has been central to improvement in Scottish policy, evident since the publication of *Ambitious, Excellent Schools: Leadership* (Scottish Executive 2005). The recommendations of the report *Teaching Scotland’s Future* (Donaldson 2011), led to a national leadership development strategy (Hamilton et al. 2018) to expand leadership capability in schools. The evaluation of this work (Scottish Government 2016d) reported considerable progress: leadership development pathways, increased professional learning opportunities for serving headteachers, a new mandatory qualification for headship.

In the current reform programme, leadership remains central: ‘highly effective leadership is key to ensuring the highest possible standards and expectations are shared across a school to achieve excellence and equity for all’ (Scottish Government 2016e, 13). However, Looney (2011, 5) notes that ‘school systems include multiple layers and links, [that] operate in diverse contexts, and employ teachers and school leaders with a range of experiences and capabilities’. The policy programme can be seen as a process of building a cohesive leadership system which Augustine et al. (2009, xv), writing in the US context, identify as ‘well-coordinated policies and initiatives across state agencies and between the state and its districts, [which] will increase the ability of principals to improve instruction in their schools’.

National policies set out the functions of different organisations and roles for policy, scrutiny and improvement, and also details how these roles are to be streamlined (Scottish Government 2017a, 38-40). Ensuring that various elements fit together is a form of structural/technical alignment (Looney 2011). Structural alignment is not easy to achieve nor a solution in itself but instead raises questions about whether central direction through such policy technologies can sit with strategies to build leadership at all levels, particularly in relation to the distribution of power needed to collaboratively generate possible strategies and make decisions to address local issues.

Spillane et al. (2005) set out three different forms of distributed leadership: collaborated, collective and co-ordinated. They propose that each form can make a contribution but it is only collaborated forms of leadership that ensure the generative processes of creating practice-based knowledge, vital for the RICs and the school clusters, are achieved. Gronn's (2002) construction of distributed leadership is akin to Spillane et al.'s (2005, 671) idea of leadership 'stretched over' but Gronn goes further, highlighting interdependency as a core characteristic of distributed leadership through 'conjoint agency'.

Gronn (2009) points to 'hybrid leadership', the co-existence of different patterns of leadership in schools: formal functional leadership alongside processes of shared leadership emerging from the conjoint agency of different groups and individuals. Hybridity is a way of understanding the flow and processes of leadership practice across an organisation and between organisations where efforts to experiment, innovate and improve rely on privileging the professional voice and expertise. What Gronn (2009) seems to be expanding upon – though he does not say so explicitly - are the processes of organisational learning described by Argyris and Schon (1996). In an organisation knowledge is 'fragmented, dispersed, incomplete' (Gronn 2009, 35). The task of collaborative leadership fostering organisational learning is realised through generating shared understandings about purposes, practices and processes to bring about improvement.

Collaboration is central to the empowerment reforms with the Joint Agreement described as 'collaboration at all levels of Scottish education and is an example of partners working

effectively and collaboratively' (Scottish Government 2019a, 2). In addition to collaborative working of LAs through the RICs, headteachers are expected to build teacher collaboration and themselves collaborate with colleagues and other agencies. As such, much rests on collaborative leadership. However, there is limited discussion in these policies of what collaborative leadership might look like aside from a definition within the national quality assurance framework:

... collaborative leadership at all levels to develop a shared vision for change and improvement which is meaningful and relevant to the context of the school within its community. Planning for continuous improvement should be evidence-based and linked to effective self-evaluation... (Education Scotland 2015, 24).

The policy language used is about empowerment through teachers and head teachers collaborating. In so doing, the teaching profession rather than the political elite are to be held to account, keeping the government at arms length from any responsibility for system failure.

Policy Rhetoric Versus Practice Realities - System Alignment through Empowerment?

Mitchell and Sackney (2016, 856), exploring improvement in high-capacity schools, caution that carefully managed systems are 'not good at fostering creativity, self-motivation, innovation and holistic growth', all factors that move consensus from one of compromise to one of collective sense-making. In these high-capacity schools the focus is on 'the lived experiences, growth and personal relationships' (856). The question is whether this approach can be scaled up to a system-level through building more cohesive leadership systems that foster development, experimentation and innovation at practice level (Augustine et al. 2009). Goldspink (2007, 38) reviewing a successful reform on learning, argues that: 'Pursuing change with high levels of flexibility and a learning and risk tolerant approach to accountability can lead to rigorous approaches to change and a focus on results'. Building genuine consensus around sensemaking and experimentation requires not just structural/technical alignment but social/process alignment (Looney 2011) which takes time.

Scotland remains committed to public sector comprehensive schooling with the same broad structures of central and local government and of schools, albeit now with a clear directive to collaborate. The challenge then, is how to achieve system improvement where the settled

relationships between different stakeholders and partners are part of the narrative of policy development in Scottish education. The importance accorded consensus in policy development can be a considerable strength. However, this depends on what we mean by consensus. The approach where a policy elite represent sectional interests, where differences of perspective are smoothed out through compromise and an accepted version of the policy is launched and cascaded, has long been a criticism of Scottish education decision-making (Humes, 1986). The imperative remains for these partners to subscribe and enact a centrally-driven improvement agenda. The danger is that the generative processes of critique, experimentation and innovation get submerged in target-based accountability.

Education systems are complex with competing demands and expectations made of and by them; these are politicised systems and, as such, unpredictable (Williams 2004). Contexts evolve, expectations change through time and place, so structural alignment is always temporary and is maintained through social alignment (Looney 2011). As the reform agenda has developed, attention has been paid to a form of social alignment with stakeholders represented on a range of committees and groups (Scottish Government 2019b). While there is an ambition for such groups to work collegiately, the reviews and inspection reports (Scottish Government 2019b) point to significant political activity where different interests compete to shape the direction. Part of this social alignment is about relationships between different actors but it is also about shared knowledge and understandings. Therefore, alignment through the NIF needs to evolve from providing information for accountability to a process of knowledge generation. Social alignment creates the multilevel engagement that Levin (2012) argues for, particularly when we conceive of these engagements as processes of sensemaking, through which not only shared understandings emerge, but also new knowledge. Writing about the development of professional learning communities as a means of improvement in Wales, Harris (2011, 625) argues that improvement is not simply the 'right change agenda or the best ideas for innovation or transformation – it is imperative that there is a compelling and effective means of implementing'. There is a danger that the compelling reasons simply relate to policy imperatives, that is technical/structural alignment. Can social alignment be enhanced in changes to governance in education?

With the current policy strategies to achieve system improvement, central government seeks to empower those in schools to build greater participation. Characterised by the OECD (2015, 98) as a 'knowledge system', the NIF is designed to provide 'the key information to evaluate performance and inform the action taken to improve attainment and wider outcomes for every child in Scotland' (Scottish Government 2015, 5) and bring coherence and consistency across several drivers for system-wide improvement. The Scottish Government also seeks to control the improvement agenda (Scottish Government 2017a) through NIF, where the use of 'data is an instrument of governance' (Grek and Ozga 2010, 4). There are questions about whether this represents an information and accountability tool or a system for generating knowledge needed to improve professional practice. Through each iteration of the NIF (Scottish Government, 2016b; 2017b; 2019c) there has been a narrowing of focus on attainment.

Leadership at all levels seems an attractive concept, with potential for greater autonomy, agency and more democratic decision-making. The co-existence of two broad forms of leadership, one with greater power creates an inherent tension with substantial power remaining with a small number alongside the drive for distributed forms of leadership. With increased responsabilisation there is a continuing tension between holding headteachers so publicly to account and building leadership at all levels. Indeed, fostering the leadership role of all teachers and collaboration across the school community, could be perceived as high risk when it is headteachers who are held to account. Highstakes accountability can lead to increasing standardization and compliance. Courtney and Gunter (2015, 405) highlight the way in which teachers who might have different views from the headteacher's vision or whose performance does not match the current orthodoxies of 'good education', are either 'disposed of', or their professional identities re-written such that 'what remains is unrecognizable and, importantly, compliant'. The consequences of increased responsabilisation can work against the notion of an empowered profession with an embedded sense of agency for the continuous improvement of the quality of pupil experiences.

The promotion of system-wide 'leadership at all levels' (Scottish Government 2016d, 4) is perceived as an important driver for improvement through empowerment, thereby building

a 'school and teacher-led system' (Scottish Government 2019b). Notions of 'leadership at all levels' and empowerment might seem to be an enhancement of the consensual approach characteristic of policy development in the Scottish system. However, with the focus also placed on governance, this might be read as a process of structural realignment and increasing centralisation which has an impact on both the role of headteachers and the LAs with regard to their ability to realise the ambitions of raising pupil attainment overall and addressing the poverty-related attainment gap.

Hatcher (2014), examining new authority-wide partnerships in England, highlights their limited strategic vision. Hatcher identifies three types of visions (1) 'preventative/remedial' focussing on deficits to be remedied to address the performance agenda, (2) 'developmental approaches' to build strategies to address the aims of an improvement agenda and (3) critical which raises questions of purpose and outcomes as well as processes and practices. Hatcher found evidence of the first two approaches but no evidence of a critical perspective. This raises the question about how generative and creative such entities can be if issues are not questioned and problems worked through. Instead at best, such forums focus on instrumental matters, a form of policy learning (Steiner-Khamsi, 2013); 'sharing good practice' rather than generating interventions to support local circumstances and need.

There are also tensions between functional and team-based leadership and a critical factor in mediating these tensions is a strong orientation to learning and development both individually and collectively: 'team learning depends on each member's individual ability to acquire knowledge, skills, and abilities as well as his or her ability to collectively share that information with teammates (Day et al. 2004, 870) and part of this process is a critical exploration of purposes as well as processes and practices. The review of the RICs feedback from regional stakeholders (those involved in the RICs as well as other agencies) indicates tensions about collaboration:

some highlighted that the Scottish Government had worked jointly with RICs through facilitating discussion and events, and producing guidance. However, regional stakeholders largely felt that they were not working jointly with Scottish Government. Most felt that Scottish Government set the agenda and they were expected to deliver.

There was a perception that the approach was very top-down, which was hard to marry with the bottom-up approach with the RICs (Scottish Government 2018b, 25).

There is the danger of over-bureaucratisation of structures to promote forms of collaboration that do not move the system forward. Therefore, we need to consider whether there is a way of constructing these groups to become genuinely collaborative and the powerhouse of ideas and practices. Unless evidence-based approaches and evaluation bring a degree of rigour and criticality to the collaborative activities, this description would seem to represent little more than a strategy for the co-ordination of activities.

The question remains whether the opportunities for social alignment are the means to simply undertake 'preventative/remedial' activities and 'developmental approaches' to build strategies to address the aims of an improvement agenda or whether these are opportunities and spaces to adopt a critical perspective which raises questions of purpose and outcomes as well as processes and practices (Hatcher, 2014) for system-level improvement. This would have profound implications for leadership at all levels and in particular, the redefining headship.

Conclusion

Ideas about 'leadership at all levels' have been expanded upon from the distribution of leadership across a school to include leadership enacted across all levels of the system. Scottish education would seem to be 'leadership-rich' with leadership exercised by different people in different places of the system. However, this article has explored some of the tensions related to leadership at all levels used as a tool to foster system alignment around the reform programme. The positioning of leadership at all levels as a key driver of system improvement raises a number of questions about leadership capability and capacity across the system, and about the structural connections and the exchanges between these levels. While there have been significant efforts in building leadership at all levels in schools, it is questionable whether Scottish education has reached the tipping point in leadership capacity and capability to realise significant system uplift. The building of a leadership development continuum through the Scottish College for Educational Leadership initially, recommended by *Teaching Scotland's Future* (Donaldson 2011), and now Education Scotland, is gaining

traction in the system. However, there is an inherent tension between building 'leadership at all levels' suggesting as it does the building of autonomy and collaboration alongside a centralised and directive government approach determined to achieve a narrowing set of targets. The building of genuine leadership capacity can conflict with the external drive for improvement, seen through the range of policy documents, where there is an increasing impatience on the part of central government to bring about improvement. This conflict is exacerbated by the quality of leadership across the system where there is real need to improve leadership of, and in, schools and at LA level. LAs are potentially the interface between central government's efforts and schools but the differential performance between LAs (Scottish Government 2017c) creates issues related to leadership capability. Aligned with this, is the need to further build the quality of leadership in the Inspectorate who also have a mediating role in the reform programme, particularly in supporting key improvement strategies around school evaluation and improvement, and policy implementation.

Leadership at all levels signals the importance of a broad based engagement in policy development and has potential in bringing about transformative change to address issues of equity and social justice in education. However, as we have argued, there is the danger that the notion of 'leadership at all levels' becomes accommodated into existing policy development processes. We seem to be at the point where the established approach to policy formulation and adoption founded on consensus and recognition of the position of different interest groups in Scottish education, sits in tension with a more direct, centralist approach on the part of Scottish Government. In mobilising support for this reform programme, these established decision-making processes have been reified leading to a situation where once again change becomes tempered by competing interests in the system. And yet, headteachers in particular are to be held to account for the implementation of policy.

There has been a significant restructuring of the roles of headteachers and LAs where the 'empowerment agenda' directs their efforts but this reconstruction has been presented within the democratic traditions of Scottish education. There are, as we have argued, key tensions related to an enduring commitment to public education forming part of the wider Scottish democratic tradition, with a specific commitment to closing the poverty related attainment gap. Arguably, it is the use of this discourse around equity, democratic traditions

and fairness at one and the same time that legitimates and constrains the current reform programme around leadership, improvement, governance, empowerment and collaboration. It could be said that the government is trying to have it all ways – to appease and satisfy all parties, yet in reality, it satisfies none.

Consequently, we are left with the question: What needs to happen to ensure that it is not the same problem of the ‘appalling inheritance of poverty’ highlighted by Dewar (Scottish Executive 1999, 5) being named, with similar policy targets being set, in another twenty years? In the introduction to *Education Governance: Next Steps* (Scottish Government 2017a, 1), John Swinney, declares that what is needed is ‘a collective determination within the teaching profession and within all levels of government to drive improvement’. However, it cannot be left to schools and school leaders(hip) to address the deep inequities found in disadvantaged communities. A cohesive approach is needed, involving the development and improvement of leadership at all levels of the system, across social services: welfare, health and education.

References

- Argyris, C. and Schon, D. 1978. *Organizational Learning: A theory of action approach*. MA, USA: Addison Wesley.
- Arnott, A. and Ozga, J. 2016. Education and nationalism in Scotland: governing a 'learning nation'. *Oxford Review of Education*, 42(3), 253-265.
- Augustine, C. H., Gonzalez, G., Ikemoto, G.S., Russell, J. et al. 2009. *Improving School Leadership: The Promise of Cohesive Leadership Systems*. Santa Monica: Rand.
- Bacchi, C. 2012. Why study problematizations? Making politics visible. *Open Journal of Political Science*, 2(1), 1-8.
- Ball, S. J. 2003. The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 215-228.
- Bell, L., & Stevenson, H. 2015. Towards an analysis of the policies that shape public education. *Management in Education*, 29(4), 146-150.
- Courtney, S. J. and Gunter, H. M. 2015. Get off my bus! School leaders, vision work and the elimination of teachers. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 18(4), 395-417.
- Donaldson, G. 2011. *Teaching Scotland's Future*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.
- Education Scotland. 2015. *How Good is Our School?* 4th Edition. Livingstone: Education Scotland.
- Forde, C. and Lowden, K. 2015. Aspirations to Headship? The Views of Experienced Deputy Headteachers in Scotland. *Contemporary Educational Leadership*, 2(2): 31-49
- Goldspink, C. 2007. Rethinking educational reform: A loosely coupled and complex systems perspective. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 35(1), 27-50.

Grek, S. and Ozga, J. 2010. Governing education through data. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(6), 937-952.

Gronn, P. 2002. Distributed leadership. In *Second International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Administration* edited by K.A. Leithwood and P. Hallinger, 653-696. Dordrecht: Springer.

Gronn, P. 2009. Hybrid leadership. In *Distributed Leadership According to the Evidence*. edited by K. Leithwood, B. Mascall and T. Strauss, 17-40. London: Routledge.

Hamilton, G., Forde, C. and McMahon, M. 2019. Developing A National Strategy in Scottish Education to Build Leadership Capacity. *Management in Education*, 32(2), 72-78.

Harris, A. 2011. System improvement through collective capacity building. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 49(6), 624-636.

Hatcher, R. 2014. Local authorities and the school system: The new authority-wide partnerships. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 42(3), 355-371.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education. 2006. *The Journey to Excellence*. Livingstone: HMiE.

Hudson, C. 2007. Governing the governance of education. *European Educational Research Journal*, 6(3), 266-282.

Humes, W. (1986) *The Leadership Class in Scottish Education*. Edinburgh: John Donald.

Joint Steering Group. 2017. *Regional Improvement Collaboratives for Education*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Jones, T. 2013. *Understanding education policy: The 'four education orientations' framework*. Australia: Springer.

Keddie, A. 2015. New modalities of state power. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 19(11), 1190-1205.

Levin, B. 2012. *System-wide improvement in education*. Brussels: IAE.

Looney, J. W. 2011. *Alignment in Complex Education Systems: Achieving Balance and Coherence*. OECD Education Working Papers. Paris: OECD.

Lubienski, C. 2014. Re-making the Middle: Dis-intermediation in International Context. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 42(3): 423–440.

Lynch, S. and Worth, J. 2017. *Keeping your head: NFER analysis of headteacher retention*. Slough, Berkshire: NFER.

MacBeath, J., Gronn, P., Opfer, D., Lowden, Forde, C., Cowie, M. and O'Brien, J. 2009. *The Recruitment and Retention of Headteachers in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Miles, M. B., and A. M. Huberman. 1994. *Qualitative Data Analysis*. 2nd ed. California: Sage.

Mitchell, C. and Sackney, L. 2016. School improvement in high-capacity schools. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, 44(5), 853-868.

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. 2015. *Improving Scottish Schools*. Paris: OECD.

Scottish Executive. 1999. *Social Justice.... A Scotland where everyone counts*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.

Scottish Executive. 2004. *A Curriculum for Excellence: Ministerial Response*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.

Scottish Executive. 2005. *Ambitious Excellent Schools: Leadership*. Edinburgh, Scottish Executive.

Scottish Government. 2015. *Creating a Smarter Scotland: A Draft National Improvement Framework for Scottish Education*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Scottish Government. 2016a. *Empowering Teachers, Parents and Communities to Achieve Excellence and Equity in Education – A Governance Review*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Scottish Government. 2016b. *National Performance Framework*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Scottish Government. 2016c. *2017 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Scottish Government. 2016d. *Evaluation of the Impact of the Implementation of Teaching Scotland's Future*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Scottish Government. 2016e. *Delivering Excellence and Equity in Scottish Education*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government

Scottish Government. 2017a. *Education Governance Next Steps*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Scottish Government. 2017b. *National Improvement Framework for Scottish Education. 2017 Evidence Report*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Scottish Government. 2017c. *Empowering Schools: A Consultation on the Provisions of the Education (Scotland) Bill*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Scottish Government. 2018a *Education Reform – Joint Agreement*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Scottish Government. 2018b. *Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs) Interim Review*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Scottish Government. 2019a. *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 Highlights from the Scotland's Results*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Scottish Government. 2019b. *Empowering Schools: Education Reform Progress Update*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Scottish Government 2019c. *Achieving Excellence and Equity 2020 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Shamir, R. 2008. The age of responsabilization: On market-embedded morality. *Economy and Society*, 37(1), 1-19.

Simkins, T., Coldron, J., Crawford, M. and Jones, S. 2015. Emerging local schooling landscapes: the role of the local authority. *School Leadership and Management*, 35(1): 1-16,

Spillane, J.P., Diamond, J.B., Sherer, J.Z. and Coldren, A.F. 2005. Distributing leadership. In Coles, M.J. and Southworth, G. (Eds.) *Developing leadership*, 37-49. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Steiner-Khamsi, G. 2013. What is wrong with the 'what-went-right' approach in educational policy? *European Educational Research Journal*, 12(1), 20-33.

Sturgeon, N. 2015. *A world leader in education*. Speech: Wester Hailles Community School, 18th August 2015 Edinburgh. From <https://firstminister.gov.scot/a-world-leader-in-education/>

Trowler, P. 1998. *Education Policy: A policy sociology approach*. Eastbourne, East Sussex: Gildridge Press.

Watson, L., 2007. 'Why would anyone want this job?' The Leadership Challenge – Improving learning in Schools, *Australian Council for Educational Research, Research Conference 2007*.

Westminster Parliament 1981. *Education (Scotland) Act 1981*. London: Westminster.

Williams, D. 2004. *Leading in complex political environments: What we are learning from superintendents of education..* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.

Young, M. D., and Diem, S. 2017. "Critical Approaches to Policy Analysis." In *Critical Approaches to Education Policy Analysis*, edited by M. D. Young, and S. Diem, 1–18. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.