Karmel Oration: Leading schools and school systems in times of change–A paradox and a quest

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Abstract

The 'paradox' in this title refers to a set of contradictions that sit at the heart of education policy in many school systems. Policymakers in these systems want things that, if not inherently at odds, are nevertheless in tension—such as a tightly defined set of national standards *and* a broad and balanced curriculum; academic stretch for the most able *and* a closing of the gap between high and low performers; choice and diversity *and* equity; and so on.

The 'quest' is for leaders and leadership to resolve these tensions in practice. School autonomy policies have placed huge power in the hands of, and pressure on the shoulders of, leaders in high-autonomy–high-accountability quasi-market systems. Research has often focused on the values, characteristics and behaviours of effective leaders and leadership teams, but there can also be a darker, toxic side to leadership, and it is clear that leadership agency is constrained by the influence of hierarchy and markets.

Meanwhile, policymakers have become increasingly concerned with how to foster innovation as they wrestle with the question of how education might adapt to the needs of an increasingly complex, globalised world. Critics argue that change has been constrained by narrowly defined criteria for success and an instrumental focus on improvement, leading to a crisis of legitimacy. What seems clear is that change will require new approaches that somehow unlock leadership agency while supporting the development of new forms of leadership that can—and consistently do—resolve the paradox.

This lecture will focus on England's efforts to create a 'self-improving school system', which can be seen as one response to these issues. It will draw on the findings from a three-year study of the changes in England to draw out the wider implications for research and policy on leadership and school system reform.

Overview

Policymakers around the world are more aware than ever of how their school systems are performing, thanks to international benchmarking studies such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS, and it seems clear that the pace and scale of reforms is increasing (Mullis, Martin, & Loveless, 2016). Some studies have sought to distil the secrets of high-performing systems (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010; Jensen, Hunter, Sonnemann, & Burns, 2012), although such 'policy borrowing' is not without its critics (Coffield, 2012).

The evidence that school autonomy coupled with high-quality leadership and appropriate accountability correlates with improvements in school quality and student outcomes is now widely accepted (Pont, Nusche, & Moorman, 2008; Hanushek, Link, & Woessmann, 2012; OECD, 2015). Consequently, most research on leadership has tended to focus on the nature of effective leadership and its impact on student outcomes at school level (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006; Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009; Day et al., 2011).

In the context of this policy orthodoxy, this paper argues that research on school leadership should focus more on the relationship between school-level leadership and system governance. This is not to deny the value of studies that focus on issues of leadership and learning within single schools, but these should be complemented by wider 'landscape reviews'—interdisciplinary, mixed-method and, where possible, comparative studies that seek to understand the consequences of school system reform policies for leaders, leadership, networks, school quality and equity.

Landscape studies—such as the four conducted in England between 2002 and 2012 that are synthesised in Earley (2013) and the one described below—can inform policy and practice by indicating the ways in which leaders respond to and enact policy-driven change across different contexts. But, equally importantly, they can also reveal the perverse and unintended consequences of policy and the implications for leadership. Greany and Earley (2017) referred to these issues in terms of a paradox and a quest:

> The *paradox* is actually a set of contradictions that sit at the heart of education policy in many school systems. Policy makers in these systems want things that, if not inherently at odds, are nevertheless in tension—freedom *and* control; tightly defined national standards *and* a broad and balanced curriculum; choice and diversity *and* equity; academic stretch for the most able children and a closing of the gap between high and low performers … School leaders … are expected to resolve (these) policy paradoxes … The *quest* is thus to understand how leaders can

lead in autonomous and accountable systems in ways which recognise and resolve, or at least mitigate, the tensions that they face. (pp. 1–4)

One challenge in researching these issues, they argued, is that it can be hard to distinguish between 'toxic' and 'successful' leadership. On the surface, both types of leader want to secure the highest possible standards of progress and attainment for children—but whereas the toxic leader (Craig, 2017) may be driven to narrow the curriculum and focus on exam scores because they are fearful of the consequences of failure, the successful leader works within an ethical and intellectual framework that grounds their actions in a deeper moral purpose and seeks to create a healthy learning environment for every child and adult in their school.

In reality, few leaders can be characterised so simplistically. Leadership decision-making and action appears to be influenced by personal experience, values and beliefs in combination with a complex range of factors, including policy, accountability and funding requirements and incentives; school self-evaluation; an understanding of the school's particular context, including socio-economic factors, staff capacity and motivation, and the behaviour of other local schools; external research evidence; and parental expectations and student voice. Nevertheless, as the research outlined below highlights, policy and accountability pressures can quickly come to dominate this list and, in the process, challenge the values and motivation of leaders.

The self-improving school system in England

This paper draws on a three-year study (2014–17) led by the author into the development of the school system in England (Greany & Higham, in press). By way of background, this section briefly summarises key developments in England in recent years.

The Conservative-led governments in power in England since 2010 have implemented a range of radical and widespread education reforms, affecting almost every aspect of school life (Earley & Greany, 2017; Lupton & Thomson, 2015). A key tenet of these reforms has been to develop a 'self-improving school system', on the basis that 'the attempt to secure automatic compliance with central government initiatives reduces the capacity of the school system to improve itself' (Department for Education, 2010, p. 13).

Greany (2014, 2015) suggested that there are four principles underpinning the government's approach to the self-improving school system:

- Teachers and schools are responsible for their own improvement.

- Teachers and schools learn from each other and from research so that effective practice spreads.
- The best schools and leaders extend their reach across other schools so that all schools improve.
- Government support and intervention is minimised.

Structural change has been a major feature of the reforms, increasing school autonomy through the academies program. 'Academies' are schools that operate as companies and charities and that are funded directly by central government rather than by their local authority. Academies are not required to follow the national curriculum or employ qualified teachers. Since 2010, any high-performing school has been allowed to convert to academy status. Meanwhile, lower-performing schools can be forced to become 'sponsored academies', meaning that the school is run by another school or sponsor, usually within a multi-academy trust (MAT). Around two-thirds of all secondary schools in England are now academies, of which around 50 per cent are in a MAT. Around a fifth of all primary schools are academies, of which around 60 per cent are in a MAT.

A further innovation since 2010 has been the expansion of system leadership and school-to-school support. 'System leaders' are high-performing head teachers and schools that are designated by the government according to set criteria—becoming a national leader of education or teaching school alliance. These leaders and their schools then lead local partnerships of schools—providing initial teacher education and professional development, for example, or providing direct improvement support to struggling schools.

The corollary of these shifts has been a wholesale reshaping of England's middle tier—in which local authorities are largely hollowed out but still nominally responsible for around three in four schools, while a mixed economy of MATs and government-appointed regional schools commissioners has emerged to oversee the academies.

Research framework and design

At the highest level, the research by Greany & Higham (in press) on which this paper is based asks how school leaders are interpreting and responding to the self-improving school system agenda. In designing the study, we recognised that the policies summarised above have not been introduced on to a clean slate: they are layered onto, and interact with, historic reforms that continue to shape the school landscape. Drawing on governance and metagovernance theory (Jessop, 2011), the conceptual framework posits that the self-improving school system agenda exists within,

and impacts on, three overlapping approaches to coordinating the school system:

1. hierarchy—the formal authority exercised by the state, including through statutory policies and guidance, bureaucracies and the accountability framework
2. markets—involving incentives and (de)regulation aimed at encouraging choice, competition, contestability and commercialisation
3. networks—the (re)creation of interdependencies that support interorganisational collaboration, partnership and participation.

The project design has included:

- four detailed locality case studies (two in areas with high densities and two in areas with low densities of academies and formally designated system leaders) involving 164 interviews with staff from 47 primary and secondary schools as well as 18 system informant interviews
- a survey of almost 700 school leaders
- analysis of national Ofsted[1] school inspection results over a 10-year period
- statistical analysis of the impact of MATs.

Findings and implications

The findings from the research (Greany & Higham, in press) are rich and complex, and space here does not permit a thorough overview. However, we outline some selected findings below.

Hierarchy

England's accountability framework maintains hierarchical control over schools by the state. Indeed, accountability—via Ofsted inspections in particular—is seen by school leaders as a central driver of their behaviour. Indeed, the influence of accountability has become widely internalised by schools, imbuing school policies, language and thinking in many areas of practice. The accountability framework places tremendous pressures on leaders to secure particular types of improvement, leading many to narrow their focus to student attainment and progress in tests. Accountability also frequently provides perverse incentives to prioritise the interests of the school over the interests of particular groups of children. Many leaders reported high levels of stress and a loss of professional motivation as a result of these pressures. A minority of schools in our sample sought to consciously resist the pressures of accountability, although such resistance was only possible from a position of relative strength and was never outright.

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1   Ofsted is the school inspection agency in England. It is a non-ministerial department that reports directly to parliament on school standards. Ofsted reports are published and grade each school at one of four levels—outstanding, good, requires improvement, and inadequate.

The school leaders we interviewed were engaged in a constant process of interpreting and responding to policy change, about which a majority were cynical at best. The virtual removal of local authorities has increased the need for schools to seek out information and support for policy implementation themselves, often via school networks.

Most schools have already become, or are becoming, accustomed to identifying and addressing their own needs, although some schools are better positioned to do this than others. The most common form of support for schools in this regard is their local cluster or partnership.

The designated system leaders described above are at the epicentre of change—faced with conflicting and often unreasonable demands from the central state, and with their motives sometimes questioned by their peers.

Markets

Quasi-market policies, such as parental choice of school and funding following the learner, have been in place in England since the late 1980s, creating competitive pressures on schools. Eighty-five per cent of secondary and 52 per cent of primary school respondents to the survey agreed that 'there is a clear local hierarchy of schools in my area, in terms of their status and popularity with parents'.

A school's positioning within its local status hierarchy was rarely seen to be a simple reflection of school quality. Rather, schools perceive local hierarchies to relate to a range of criteria, including school context and student composition. These factors combine over time to position a school relative to other local schools—and once gained, a positioning can be hard to change.

Most schools were working more or less overtly to protect their status or to engineer a move up the local hierarchy. Sometimes these moves were slow and unspectacular, reflecting hard work over time to build trust and support in the local community. Equally, we report examples of sharp-edged competition and 'cream-skimming' as schools sought to attract more middle-class students.

One impact of these stratification processes was that schools—and particularly school leaders—could end up with different perceptions of their locality and the children within it.

Low-status schools invariably faced challenges, including under-subscription, higher student mobility and disproportionate numbers of disadvantaged, migrant and hard-to-place children.

Networks

School-to-school networks have become more important for schools since 2010 and are continuing to evolve rapidly, partly as a result of direct encouragement and incentives from policy.

The leaders we interviewed articulated a range of benefits from partnership working, including professional learning, school improvement, giving confidence and capacity to leaders, securing efficiencies and fulfilling the moral purpose of education.

We describe a small number of networks that can be deemed both 'effective'—in that they are impacting on the quality of teaching and learning or the breadth and depth of the curriculum in member schools—and, more or less, 'inclusive'. However, we also describe common examples where networks are either underdeveloped or have fallen apart. We also give examples where network effectiveness is reliant on a degree of exclusivity—for example, where a subgroup of higher-performing schools in an area chose to work together.

We conclude by asking why some partnerships develop successfully but others do not. Where partnerships fail, the influence of accountability and markets is always significant, but other factors are at play as well. Some partnerships are overly dominated by one individual or school, with other schools chafing to escape and assert their own independence. In cases where partnerships have not formed at all, we conclude that it is because leaders do not have the appetite, skills or interpersonal relationships required to form and lead them.

Successful partnerships can benefit from a range of factors at the initiation stage, such as a rise in student numbers that reduces competitive pressure. Three aspects emerge as particularly important in shaping successful partnerships: shared attitudes and values; age and experience; and interpersonal and consensus-building skills. The most effective partnerships facilitated a rich and dense network of informal ties between schools and staff, based on high levels of trust. It was also important for partnerships to have effective structures and processes.

Conclusions and implications

The research report identifies a series of cross-cutting themes and implications from the research, some of which I will highlight in my oration. The key point I want to highlight here, though, is that as the state steps back from traditional bureaucratic control of schools, it appears to retain control by 'steering at a distance' (Hudson, 2007)—mixing combinations of hierarchy, markets and networks to achieve its goals. The implication for schools and school leaders can be a semblance of autonomy and self-governance, but in practice this is frequently experienced as a loss of support coupled with increased pressure as data is used to hold schools accountable (Ozga, 2009).

This can create tensions for front-line leaders, echoing the paradox and quest issues outlined above and in

line with findings from research on governance in wider sectors (Newman & Clarke, 2009).

I argue that, in these contexts, a narrow research focus on the 'leadership of learning' within schools is insufficient. Evidence is increasingly clear that successful school systems are aligned in terms of governance and incentives (Pritchett, 2015), but the rise of 'steering at a distance' (Hudson, 2007) and lateral school networks is arguably making such incentives more complex. One outcome can be toxic leadership at school level as leaders feel forced to place institutional self-interest above the interests of certain children. Researchers must help policymakers and practitioners to understand and address these systemic pressures productively, so that more schools can succeed and equity can be enhanced.

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