

School and System Reform – An Agenda for Wales

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ABSTRACT

The article begins with a review of what is known internationally about system level reform. With these frameworks in mind, a critique is then made of recent educational change efforts in Wales. This is followed by a comprehensive description of a system reform strategy for Wales based around the four drivers of personalised learning, professionalised teaching, intelligent accountability and networks and collaboration, all of which are moulded to context by system leadership. It is this framework that holds promise for sustained progress in student achievement throughout the country.

Keywords: school reform, system leadership, personalised learning, teachers

Introduction

This article is a reflection on how we achieve educational, particularly school, reform at scale, with a particular focus on Wales. Since the early 1980s we have learned much about how to improve individual schools, but successful efforts at systemic improvement have remained elusive (Fullan, 2009). There have recently been ambitious attempts to reform whole systems, but these have tended to be: (i) oppressive and resulted in considerable alienation, such as some of the state-wide reforms in the USA; (ii) well designed and centrally driven, but with impact stalling after early success, as with the literacy reforms in England; or (iii) sustained, but usually due

to factors outside the immediate control of educators and policy-makers, such as in Finland. What is needed is a ‘grand theory’ of system change in education that results in relatively predictable increases in student learning and achievement over time – this essay is a modest contribution to that worthwhile and necessary goal.

Successful implementation of educational policy at the system level

In his chapter in *Change Wars*, Sir Michael Barber (2009) reminds us that it was the school effectiveness research in the 1980s, which gave us increasingly well-defined portraits of the effective school, that led in the 1990s to increasing knowledge of school improvement (i.e. how to achieve effectiveness). In the same way, we have in the last decade begun to learn far more about the features of an effective educational system, but are only now beginning to understand the dynamics of improvement at system level.

The equivalent of the school effectiveness research at the system level has been provided during the last decade or so by the advent of international benchmarking studies. Most probably the best known and most influential is the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Since 2000, when the OECD launched PISA, they have been monitoring learning outcomes in the principal industrialised countries on a regular basis. As Andreas Schleicher (2009), who leads the PISA for the OECD, recently said: ‘In the dark, all institutions and education systems look the same. It is comparative benchmarking that sheds light on the differences on which reform efforts can then capitalize.’ However, as Schleicher admits, although international benchmarks alone cannot identify cause and effect relationships between inputs, processes and educational outcomes, they can highlight those key features in which education systems show similarities and differences and relate them to a student performance on a variety of outcome measures.

Schleicher himself (cited in Hopkins, 2013) identifies the following ‘ingredients’ of successful systems from the PISA studies:

- systematic and equitable funding;
- universal standards – mirrored in the views of students, parents and school principals;
- school autonomy;
- mix of accountability systems – internal and external;

- continuous monitoring of standards and quick interventions when failure to achieve them is identified;
- creating the appropriate environment to achieve the standards set:
 - get the right people to become teachers;
 - o develop teachers into effective instructors (internal and external Professional Development);
 - o place incentives and differentiated support systems to ensure that every child gets the support that it needs;
- focus on the curriculum and introduce skills required for the twenty-first century; and
- networking and innovation.

On the basis of this, Schleicher claims that excellence and equity are achievable!

The problem with lists such as this is that they are a ‘counsel of perfection’. They may well list the desiderata for an effective system, but they do not contain a ‘theory of action’ that helps one achieve it. They are all about the ‘what’ rather than the ‘how’. It is now generally acknowledged that the key to managing system reform is by strategically re-balancing ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ change over time. The argument goes something like this (Hopkins, 2007):

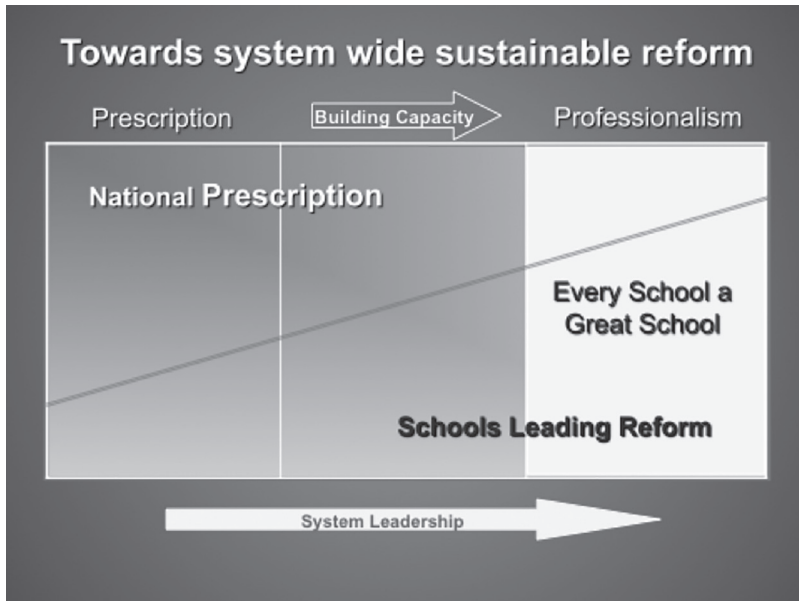
- Most agree that when standards are too low and too varied that some form of direct state intervention is necessary. Typically, the resultant ‘national prescription’ proves very successful in raising standards in the short term.
- But progress soon tends to plateau and, whilst a bit more improvement could be squeezed out, especially in underperforming schools, one has to question whether prescription still offers the recipe for sustained large-scale reform into the medium or long term.
- There is a growing recognition that schools need to lead the next phase of reform. But, if the hypothesis is correct, it must categorically not be a naive return to the not-so-halcyon days when a thousand flowers bloomed and the educational life chances of too many of our children wilted.
- The implication is that we need a transition from an era of Prescription to an era of Professionalism, in which the balance between national prescription and schools leading reform will change.

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However, achieving this rebalancing is not straightforward. As Michael Fullan (2003) has commented, it takes capacity to build capacity, and if there is insufficient capacity to begin with it is folly to announce that a move to ‘professionalism’ provides the basis of a new approach. The key question is ‘how do we get there?’, because we cannot simply move from one era to the other without self-consciously building professional capacity throughout the system. It is this progression that is illustrated in Figure 1 and discussed at length in *Every School a Great School* (Hopkins, 2007). This insight seems by now to have achieved widespread support. Barber (2009) stressed the need for system leadership along with capacity building. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) argued for a ‘Fourth Way of Change’ that consisted of combining top-down ‘national vision, government steering and support with “professional involvement” and “public engagement”, all for the purpose of promoting “learning and results”’.

It is worth taking a little time to unpack the thinking underlying Figure 1: four points in particular need to be made.

Figure 1: System reform



The first is to emphasise that neither top-down nor bottom-up change work when conducted in isolation; they have to be in balance, in a creative tension. At any one time, the balance between the two will of course depend on context. Secondly, at the early stages of a reform programme, when the system is in a relatively poor state, more central direction is needed. This reflects the initial emphasis on national prescription, as seen in the left-hand segment of the diagram. Over time, as competence and confidence increase, the policy agenda and school practice move towards the right-hand side of the diagram. Third, it should be no surprise to realise that the right-hand segment is relatively unknown territory. It implies horizontal and lateral ways of working with assumptions and governance arrangements very different from what is conventionally known. The main difficulty in imagining this landscape is that the thinking of most people is constrained by their experiences within the power structure and norms of the left-hand segment of the diagram.

Finally, it needs to be reiterated that the transition from prescription to professionalism implied by the diagram is not easy to achieve. In order to move from one to the other, strategies are required that not only continue to raise standards, but also develop social, intellectual and organisational capital. Building capacity demands that numerous central initiatives are replaced with a national consensus on a limited number of educational trends.

The influential McKinsey studies (e.g. Mourshed et al., 2010), have built on this tradition. In particular, Mourshed and her colleagues (2010) have drawn lessons from the analysis of PISA results over time to support the idea of stage-dependent ‘innovation clusters’ that follow such a pattern, moving progressively from top-down to increasingly lateral ways of working (Hopkins, 2013). Four stages of improvement were identified:

- ‘Poor to fair’ – ensuring basic standards;
- ‘Fair to good’ – consolidating system foundations;
- ‘Good to great’ – professionalising teaching and leadership; and
- ‘Great to excellent’ – system-led innovation.

A summary of the progression in these four phases is given below.

Poor to fair

System improvement journeys in this phase focused on achieving basic literacy and numeracy by emphasising three themes:

1. Providing scaffolding and motivation for low-skilled teachers and principals

Scripted lessons: the system creates instructional objectives, lesson plans and learning materials for daily lessons to enable teachers to focus on executing lessons and reduce expectation for devising lessons.

Coaching on curriculum: the system creates a field-force of coaches to visit schools and work with teachers in class on delivering the curriculum effectively.

Incentives for high performance: the system gives rewards (monetary and prestige) to schools and teachers who achieve high improvement in student outcomes against targets.

School visits by centre: the system's central leaders/administrators visit schools to observe, meet and motivate staff, and discuss performance.

Instructional time on task: the system increases student instructional time.

2. Getting all schools to a minimum quality standard

Targets, data and assessments: the system sets minimum proficiency targets for schools/students, frequent student learning assessments (linked to lesson objectives, every three to four weeks), and data processes to monitor progress.

Infrastructure: the system improves school facilities and resources to a minimum threshold adequate for attendance and learning.

Textbooks and learning resources: the system provides textbooks and learning resources to every student.

Supporting low-performing schools: the system funds targeted support for low-performing schools.

3. Getting students in seats

Increase seats: the system increases school seats to achieve universal access.

Fulfil students' basic needs: the school provides for student basic needs to ensure that more students attend school and that absenteeism declines.

Fair to good

Improvement journeys in this phase emphasise getting the system foundations in place, focusing on three key strategies that build on those outlined in the previous phase. They are:

1. Data and accountability foundation

Transparency and accountability: the system establishes student assessments and school inspections to create reliable data on performance and to hold schools accountable for improvement.

Improvement areas: the system uses this data to identify and tackle specific areas with lagging performance, e.g. subjects, grades, gender.

2. Financial and organisational foundation

Organisation structure: the system takes steps to make the school network shape and governance manageable, and to delineate decision rights accordingly.

Financial structure: the system establishes an efficient and equitable funding allocation mechanism for schools.

3. Pedagogical foundation

Learning model: the system selects a learning model consistent with raising student capabilities and designs the necessary supporting materials for this new model, e.g. standards, curriculum, textbooks. </1>

Good to great

Improvement journeys in this phase emphasise shaping the professional. Systems, to be successful in this phase, need to have the elements of previous phases embedded, before progress here can be predicted. The three components of this phase are:

1. Raising the calibre of entering teachers and principals

Recruiting: the system raises the entry bar for new teacher candidates.

Preparation and induction: the system raises pre-service training quality and certification requirements.

2. Raising the calibre of existing teachers and principals

Professional development: the system raises professional development requirements and provides more opportunities for self-, peer- and centre-led learning.

Coaching on practice: instructional coaches work with teachers to strengthen their skills in areas such as lesson planning, student data analysis and in-class pedagogy.

Career pathways: the system creates teacher and leadership specialisations through career pathways, raising expectations with each successive pathway rung and increasing pay accordingly.

3. School-based decision-making

Self-evaluation: the system cultivates ownership in schools for improvement through introducing self-evaluation for schools and making performance data more available.

Flexibility: the system gives schools the flexibility to pursue specialised

programmes appropriate to their students and increasingly decentralises pedagogical rights.

Great to excellent

To ensure that there is maximum system capacity at the point of delivery, improvement journeys in this final phase emphasise learning through peers and innovation. In line with the argument of this article, this phase might not be entered into by all systems and certainly not those who espouse top-down or outside-in ways of working. By definition, these strategies cannot unleash greatness; they just ensure that all schools regress to the mean. The three broad strategies here are:

1. Cultivating peer-led learning for teachers and principals
Learning communities: the system facilitates school-based learning communities to create peer-led support and accountability to each other.
Flexibility: the system provides effective educators with greater pedagogical autonomy.
Rotations: the system rotates educators throughout the system in order to spread learning and varied styles of mentorship.
2. Creating additional support mechanisms for professionals
Leverage: the system provides administrative staff in schools so that teachers and principals can focus on pedagogy and leadership rather than administrative tasks.
3. System-sponsored innovation across schools
Stakeholder innovation: the system sponsors and identifies examples of innovative practices in schools (teaching and learning practice, parent/community involvement practices, etc.) and then develops strategies to share them across all schools.

It is also worth noting that at any phase, in its early stages there needs to be a stimulus to ‘ignite’ the reform programme (Mourshed et al., 2010). School systems that have successfully ignited reforms and sustained their momentum have all relied on at least one of three events to get them started: they have taken advantage of a political or economic crisis, they have commissioned a high-profile report critical of the system’s performance, or they have appointed a new energetic and visionary political or strategic leader. The role of new leadership is a common and particularly important pattern in igniting school system reforms. These leaders take

advantage of being new, but stay a longer time than usual. They also follow a common ‘playbook’ of practices, described as follows:

- decide on what is ‘non-negotiable’;
- install capable and like-minded people in the most critical positions;
- engage with stakeholders;
- secure the resources for what is non-negotiable; and
- get ‘early wins’ on the board quickly.

Those countries and schools that utilise this knowledge strategically are able to make significant progress quite rapidly. This only occurs, however, when it is realised that:

- different clusters of policy levers are related to specific phases of system performance;
- this is a sequential process, not à la carte;
- deep implementation is necessary at each phase to ensure a secure foundation for the next;
- leadership is critical; and
- narrative is crucial.

As a result of this work we have learned a great deal about the features of high-performing educational systems over the past ten years. This is not only from by benchmarking studies such as PISA, but also from secondary analyses, such as Fenton Whelan’s (2009) *Lessons Learned: how good policies produce better schools* and the McKinsey studies *How the World’s Best Performing School Systems Come Out on Top* (Barber and Mourshed, 2007) and *Capturing the leadership premium* (Barber et al., 2010).

To summarise, and based on the best of global experience, the following are the key ingredients of reform efforts in both high-performing educational schools and systems (Hopkins, 2013). Each principle has a high degree of operational practicality.

1. Ensuring that the achievement and learning of students, expressed as *moral purpose*, is at the centre of all that teachers do. This requires a focus on those strategies that have a track record of accelerating student achievement, such as building student learning capability, personalising learning and the curriculum, assessment for learning and giving students a voice in their own learning.

2. As a consequence, it is the enhancement of the *quality of teaching*, rather than structural change, that needs to be the central theme of any improvement strategy. The quality of teaching is necessarily related to system goals and targeted support. These are likely to have a heavy emphasis in the first instance on the teaching of literacy and numeracy and the development of curiosity.
3. High levels of student learning and achievement will be partially achieved by *teacher selection policies* that ensure that only the very best people become educators and educational leaders. Almost by definition, this creates a positive school work culture and high levels of professional practice.
4. The development of this *professional practice* occurs within a system context where there is increasing clarity on the standards implied by the goals set, and the generation of the most appropriate curriculum and teaching strategies necessary to achieve those standards.
5. Putting in place ongoing and sustained *professional learning opportunities* that develop a common 'practice' of teaching and learning through blending theory, evidence and action through collaborative forms of enquiry.
6. To enable this, procedures are needed to provide *formative, ongoing and transparent data* (both assessment data and inspection evidence) on the performance of the student, school and system that facilitate improvements in learning and teaching.
7. Student and school performance is enhanced by teachers and leaders '*going deeper*' and *intervening early*, following diagnosis that reflects a range of differential strategies based on performance, with targets being set that are related to implementation.
8. The development of professional practice, utilisation of data and early intervention using differential strategies takes place in schools where the *leadership* has:
 - very high levels of expectation for both teachers and students;
 - an unrelenting focus on the quality of learning and teaching;
 - created structures that ensure an orderly learning environment and that empower and generate professional responsibility and accountability;
 - developed a work culture that takes pride in sharing excellence and has a high degree of trust and reciprocity; and
 - when appropriate, supported leadership development across a locality.

9. *Inequities in student performance* are addressed through:

- good early education;
- direct classroom support for those falling behind;
- high levels of targeted resourcing; and
- utilising differential strategies at the school level.

10. Finally, *system level structures* are established that reflect the processes just described, linking together the various levels of the system through to the school and classroom, developing capacity by balancing professional autonomy and accountability, and promoting disciplined innovation as a consequence of networking. These activities combine to produce a work culture that has at its core strong pressure to improve, takes seriously its responsibility to act on and change context, and that embodies a commitment to focus, flexibility and collaboration.

A critique of Welsh education policy

In the previous section of the article some of the characteristics of effective system reform efforts have been summarised. The four-stage analysis provides the basis of a diagnosis of the Welsh system and a direction for policy development, and the list of ten principles an aide-memoire against which the current set of policies can be assessed. The comparison between these analyses, what actually has occurred, and a sense of what is good practice in the system reform now enable us to make some informed judgements about the success so far of Welsh education reform and make some recommendations as to future action.

There is no doubt that Wales is by global standards a successful educational system. It has elements of both what McKinsey would term a 'fair to good' and a good to great' system. Wales, however, is also slipping behind systems of such as Australia, Ontario, Canada and the other home countries, with which previously they were on a par. There are a number of reasons for this and they are worth briefly considering here.

First, there are aspects of high-performing systems, as seen above, that have been neglected or weakly implemented in Wales. So, for example, accountability systems are still relatively crude and not linked to increased performance, there is a lack of a secure pedagogy that reliably leads to enhanced student learning, the standards of entrants to the teaching

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profession are lower than in equivalent systems and the architecture for sustained self-improvement is missing. As a result, within-school variation is much higher than it should be; in particular, as Estyn (2014) has pointed out, assessment is a major issue.

Second, political imperatives rarely match accurate system diagnosis, so there has usually been a mismatch between what ministers and bureaucrats are proposing and what the system needs. In addition, although there have been examples of strong educational leadership in Wales in the recent past, this has been episodic and not sustained. This applies at all levels – national, local and school.

Third, bureaucratic rather than systemic organisational structures and cultures have tended to dominate. Such structures do not have a good track record in facilitating or embedding reform programmes that impact positively on student learning in a sustained way.

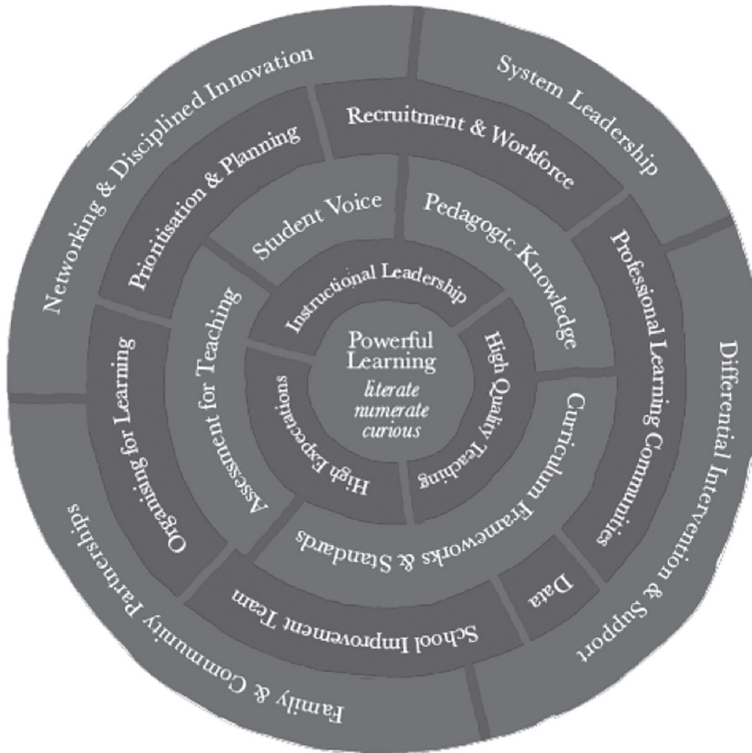
These issues are resolvable; indeed many systems in the recent past have been very successful in addressing them, some with spectacular results, as seen most recently, for example, in Canada, Singapore and Poland. Unfortunately, this is not the case in Wales at the present time.

In the spirit of constructive critique, here are two examples of how recent and well-intentioned policy initiatives in Wales could have been re-conceived to enable them to have a significant positive impact on educational progress. The two policy initiatives – the School Effectiveness Framework and Minister Andrews's 'Twenty Actions' – are not critiqued as such; rather, an alternative but complementary approach is proposed.

As regards the School Effectiveness Framework, the alternative proposition is a framework, seen in Figure 2, for thinking about and planning 'authentic' school improvement from the 'inside-out'. This model for school improvement, as seen in this diagram, expresses the context and process of school improvement through the image of a series of concentric rings. It is more of an action framework than a blueprint and is designed to help teachers and school leaders to think strategically about school improvement, rather than necessarily telling them what to do.

At the centre of the model, *personalised and powerful learning* is recognised as being at the heart of the school's moral purpose. This represents the goal that every student will reach their potential and that they acquire a range of knowledge, skills and dispositions that will equip them, not just to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, but to help shape it. The next ring is comprised of those essential ingredients of effective *classroom practice* that focus on the instructional core so necessary for personalised learning.

Figure 2 Working from the ‘inside-out’



This is the teacher’s repertoire of teaching and learning strategies, the organisation of curriculum, in terms of frameworks and standards, and the ways in which students are involved in their learning. Such classroom practice is found in schools that have *organisational capacity* supportive of high levels of teaching and learning – these key elements are found in the next ring. In today’s educational systems it is recognised that ‘no school is an island’. Schools exist within a broader *systemic context*, represented in the outer ring of the diagram.

This model of school improvement is more than the sum of its parts (Hopkins and Craig, 2015). There are four implications for viewing the

process of school improvement in this way. The first is that when all are pulling in the same direction, then the aspirations of school improvement have much more chance of success. All need to exist in a reciprocal relationship if student attainment is to be enhanced. The second is that schools need to develop a deep appreciation of their current performance along with their particular strengths and weaknesses (with external assistance as required) to determine where in the model to focus their energies and, hence, where their improvement journey needs to start. The third relates to the crucial issue of where the initiative for improvement comes from. Most school reform assumes that change comes from the 'outside-in'. In those schools that have made the jump from 'good to great' the linear logic of policy implementation has been inverted – they start from the centre of the circle and move outwards; they survey the range of policy initiatives confronting the school to see which they can most usefully mould to their own improvement plans. Paradoxically, it is these schools that appear to be the most effective at interpreting the centralised reform agenda. This is what is called working from the 'inside-out'. Finally, it is this way of working that places great demands on school and system leadership. It requires: the courage to collaborate; the abandonment of activities that do not best serve student achievement; the creation of a culture of mutual interdependence and trust; and being open to evidence of what works in school reform.

It needs to be emphasised that successful school improvement is neither singularly system-led nor led by individual schools – it is best achieved by one supporting the other in an actively interdependent, mutually beneficial relationship. This is why System Leadership as the main driver of such an approach is so important.

In 2011 Leighton Andrews, Minister for Education and Skills, announced a twenty-point action plan to secure a step change in educational performance in Wales. This was a well-intentioned reform effort that focused on a range of educational challenges in Wales and proposed a series of individual policy initiatives. As has already been intimated, the transition from 'prescription' to 'professionalism' requires strategies that not only continue to raise standards, but also build capacity within the system. This point is key; one cannot just drive to continue to raise standards in an instrumental way, and one also needs to develop social, intellectual and organisational capital. Building capacity demands that we replace numerous central initiatives with a national consensus on a limited number of educational trends. So, instead of proposing a list of 'twenty actions', the

Figure 3 Four key drivers underpinning system reform



proposal here is to identify a limited number of domains for reform, within which the twenty actions could be coherently brigaded. The four drivers of personalised learning, professionalised teaching, networks and collaboration and intelligent accountability provide the core strategy for systemic improvement in most high-performing, ‘good to great’ educational systems. They are the canvas on which system leadership is exercised. As seen in Figure 3, the ‘diamond of reform’, the four trends coalesce through the exercise of responsible system leadership. To reiterate the two crucial points: first, single reforms do not work – it is only clusters of linked policy initiatives that will provide the necessary traction; second, it is system leadership, however, that drives implementation and adapts policies to context.

Personalised learning

The emphasis on personalisation is about putting students at the heart of the education process so as to tailor teaching to individual need, interest

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and aptitude, in order to fulfil every young person's potential. Many schools and teachers have tailored curriculum and teaching methods to meet the needs of children and young people with great success for many years. What is new is the drive to make the best practices universal. A successful system of personalised learning means clear learning pathways through the education system and the motivation to become independent, e-literate, fulfilled, lifelong learners.

Professionalised teaching

Significant empirical evidence suggests that teaching quality is the most significant factor influencing student learning that is under the control of the school (Sammons et al., 2008). It is also clear that the forms of teaching that promote high levels of student learning vary, in some instances quite dramatically, from country to country. The phrase 'professionalised teaching' implies that teachers are on a par with other professions in terms of diagnosis, the application of evidence-based practices and professional pride. The image here is of teachers who use data to evaluate the learning needs of their students, and who are consistently expanding their repertoire of pedagogic strategies to personalise learning for all students. It also implies schools that adopt innovative approaches to timetabling and the deployment of increasingly differentiated staffing models.

Intelligent accountability

Because of the ubiquity of external forms of accountability, it is often necessary to compensate by increasing the emphasis on internal forms of accountability. The most common approaches would be the use of teacher assessment, bottom-up target setting, value-added measures of school performance, and the school holding itself publicly accountable through publishing its own profile of strengths, weaknesses and benchmark comparisons, giving a more rounded picture of the school's performance. It is these forms of accountability that: (a) allow a sharper fix on the focus of personalisation; and (b) develop the professional skill of the teaching staff involved. As a consequence, when the balance between external and internal accountability become more even, it also becomes more 'intelligent'. The assumption also is that over time, as schools increasingly lead reform, internal forms of accountability will become the more important.

Networking and collaboration

This relates to the various ways in which networks of schools can stimulate and spread innovation as well as collaborate to provide curriculum diversity, extended services and community support. The prevalence of networking practice supports the contention that there is no contradiction between strong, independent schools and strong networks, rather the reverse. Nor is there a contradiction between collaboration and competition – many sectors of the economy are demonstrating that the combination of competition and collaboration delivers the most rapid improvements. Although evidence of effectiveness is still accumulating, it is becoming clear that networks support improvement and innovation by enabling schools to collaborate on building curriculum diversity, extended services and professional support to develop a vision of education that is shared and owned well beyond individual school gates.

Although these key drivers provide a core strategy for systemic improvement, it is, as has already been noted, system leadership that adapts them to particular and individual school contexts. This is leadership that enables systemic reform to be both generic in terms of overall strategy and specific in adapting to individual and particular situations, using the ‘inside-out’ school improvement framework just described. It is then system leaders who reach beyond their own school to create networks and collaborative arrangements that not only add richness and excellence to the learning of students, but also act as agents of educational transformation. A reform narrative that achieves that and moves Wales along the pathway to excellence is presented in the final section of the article.

A system reform agenda for Wales

The overall aim of any Welsh reform effort must be to raise the standards of educational attainment to world-class levels for our children and young people and to reduce the variation of performance between them. Wales’s recent PISA results suggest that the country is not meeting either of these objectives. The children and young people of Wales deserve better than this. Urgent action is required to reverse this alarming trend. In the narrative that follows is a direction of travel, set within the previous analysis of system reform, that will secure a brighter future for the children and young people of Wales. These policy proposals are set within the ‘diamond of reform framework’ outlined earlier, as well as reflecting the previous

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analysis of good practice in system improvement. It is clear from the practices of those school systems that are already high performing that their sustained success is a consequence of their enacting a series of integrated and aligned policies and strategies that match their current stage of growth. This also requires a high degree of policy alignment and synergy – the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The alignment need to be both horizontal and vertical, and at all levels of the system.

Personalised learning

Personalised learning demands both curriculum entitlement and choice that delivers a breadth of study and personal relevance, as well as emphasising the development of the student's meta-cognitive capacity, in other words, 'learning how to learn'. This is an emphasis that the author pioneered in England in the early/mid 2000s, and although personalised learning does not have the same policy emphasis there as it did then, it is still an important driver for reform in Wales.¹ Recent poor showing in PISA suggests that there needs to be a renewed and clear focus on the curriculum, particularly literacy, numeracy and the acquisition of learning/thinking skills. There needs to be confidence that scope, sequence and standards in the Welsh curriculum are fit for purpose. It is essential to take rapid action on the following issues:

- the need for a comprehensive approach to literacy and numeracy that focuses on both 'quick wins' and 'systemic improvement';
- it seems paramount to have a strong focus on the consistent acquisition of learning/thinking skills from the Foundation Phase onwards;
- there is also a need to reach out to parents and families to ensure that they have the skills, knowledge and dispositions to support the learning and achievement of their children at all stages of their education. Schemes such as the 'Family Learning Signature' and 'Investors in Families' have a role to play here; and
- there is also a case for extending the Welsh Baccalaureate into KS3 so as to ensure that 14-year-olds move on to the 14–19 phase of education with secure achievements, experiences and entitlements that equip them for future progression.

Professionalised teaching

There is, therefore, a need to expand the knowledge base of professional practice. If teachers are to raise standards and reduce variation then they need access to the very best knowledge, whether from research or established practice. One suggestion would be to organise a ‘design competition’ to identify those proven teaching and curricula practices in schools that have a track record of raising standards of learning and achievement, particularly in Literacy. A collection of these ‘kite-marked programmes’ as well as practical research-proven strategies could then become available to support the work of system leaders, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and their partner schools.

It is clear that the quality of teaching in Wales is too variable. Although there are many outstanding practitioners in the country, as already noted, the ‘within school variation’ is, according to PISA, far too high. There are four strategies that in combination would enhance the quality of teaching in the short to medium term:

- *The quality of new entrants to the profession.* This is a medium- to long-term issue and is difficult to affect because we have little control over teacher training, as so many NQTs come from beyond our jurisdiction. Although the Masters in Educational Practice (MEP) has been abandoned, the proposed Masters Framework is to be welcomed. It is a world-class idea and would give a distinctive feel to professional practice in Wales. The current ‘Teach First’ scheme is a step in the right direction.
- *The focusing of CPD on professional practice.* Given the historic emphasis on Professional Learning Communities, they could well become the dominant form of CPD in Wales, especially if they are to focus on the key priorities and metrics discussed in this section of the article. Triads to enhance professional practice should also be part of the ‘PLC offer’.
- *Expand the knowledge base of professional practice.* If teachers are to raise standards and reduce variation then they need access to the very best knowledge whether from research or established practice. This suggestion is an extension of the proposal noted above.
- *Performance management that enhances professional practice.* It is necessary to use performance management to drive increased competence in teaching rather than merely holding teachers to account, such as portfolio assessment of the professional work of the triads.

Intelligent accountability

For a number of years Wales has had three key educational priorities of Literacy, Numeracy and ‘closing the gap’. This is necessary but not sufficient; policy-makers must go further and begin to quantify the gains that need to be made, and by when. Wales must also avoid the crude application of top-down targets that has limited reform efforts in other countries. In the spirit of ‘intelligent accountability’, and in order to ‘raise the bar and narrow the gap’, three types of target in literacy and numeracy should be set at the end of each Key Stage:

- a. A floor target – being an absolute standard below which no school in Wales will perform. This is to ensure that all children and young people will reach adequate levels of educational performance.
- b. An aspirational target – being the level at which children and young people will be performing when Wales becomes a world-class educational system. Schools will be required to demonstrate how and when they will reach this level of educational performance.
- c. A progress target – that relates to the progress of individual students. Schools will monitor the progress of each of their students to ensure that every child and young person makes one year of educational progress each calendar year.

There is also a question as to whether there is a sufficiently comprehensive system for formative and summative evaluation and assessment in Wales. Even as regards Estyn, the Welsh inspectorate, there must be questions whether their current methodologies are capable of delivering what is now required. There are two key dimensions to be considered here:

- Is the necessary architecture for accountability and assessment in place? There are usually considered to be five components to an accountability framework:
 - ➡ Targets or metrics, as discussed above
 - ➡ Testing or assessing the progress of students for formative and summative purposes
 - ➡ Measures of school performance – this is a key political decision, and again one must question whether current approaches give sufficiently sensitive and precise quantitative and qualitative information about a school, as well as the publication of performance tables.

- ➡ Inspection of schools and the link to self-evaluation
- ➡ Performance management of teachers, heads, local authorities and consortia.
- The second dimension is the balance in all of this between external accountability and internal assessment – this balancing is what is referred to in this article as ‘intelligent accountability’. The balance will also need to be adjusted according to school performance – hence the importance of differentiated intervention strategies.

Networking and collaboration

One of the achievements of the work on School Effectiveness Framework some years ago was that a national infrastructure for school improvement (comprising consortia working, system leaders and PLCs) began to emerge. The work on establishing consortia is an important aspect of this. System leaders in each consortium are also critical for the implementation of a ‘differentiated approach to school improvement’. The focus on PLC working needs to be aligned with the system’s key priorities and to ensure that high-quality knowledge of ‘what works’ is widely disseminated and implemented through them. The educational challenges faced by Wales demand a systemic response. This is why the move to consortia working is both necessary and welcome. Although independent and contextually distinct, consortia will need, however, to work in collaborative and consistent ways to ensure that Wales is a national system, regionally led.

In order to achieve this there needs to be a robust process of governance and accountability within consortia, and between the consortium and their constituent local authorities and, of course, the Welsh Government. Each consortium should regionalise the school improvement, social inclusion and additional learning needs support-and-challenge services provided by each constituent authority to its schools. Each consortium will identify and agree targets for its member authorities in line with the metrics proposed above. The baseline target should be set nationally, but consortia would need to agree when each member authority will reach the aspirational target and agree challenging progress targets with them.

System leadership

In terms of school improvement, leadership is as close to a silver bullet as we have in the pursuit of educational excellence. Again, there are some

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outstanding leaders in Welsh schools, but the quality is too variable. To remedy this it is proposed that:

- all leadership training reflects the basic repertoire of leadership practices – setting direction, managing teaching and learning, developing people and organisational redesign. These need to be reflected in Wales’s ‘leadership standards’, together with a coherent progression through the phases of a leader’s development/career;
- a staff college is established for leadership – this could be virtual, but is needed to develop a national profile for leadership. This could be delivered through the four consortia;
- the approach to ‘system leadership’ to drive excellence in an increasingly devolved system noted above is extended; and
- Wales’s ‘leading schools’ are recognised as such and are commissioned to provide support for the system as a whole. The role of ‘training schools’, for example, has become increasingly important in many high-performing systems.

To restate the key point, there needs to be a sustained focus on leadership in Wales, in particular the identification of the basic leadership practices, a staff college, extending the system leader role, and the establishing of training schools, because these are all features of systems that sustain high levels of performance.

Coda

School-age education in Wales is at a crossroads. Recent PISA results are a wake-up call, as Leighton Andrews pointed out (Smith, 2012). Without urgent and drastic action, results will continue to stagnate and decline. On the basis of the evidence reviewed in this article, the proposals made here have a chance of making the difference needed in the educational achievement of all Welsh children and young people. It does, however, require collaborative committed action on the part of all the actors in the system. Above all, it requires a concerted moral purpose couched in a compelling narrative at the national level. That is the common characteristic of those systems on the journey to greatness.

This is not high-blown idealism; it is simply the commitment to provide a high-quality education for all students, regardless of background. This is

to ensure that the conditions are in place to enable every student to reach their potential. The moral purpose is usually reflected in a small number of tangible but ambitious objectives for student learning and achievement that are being vigorously pursued. Educational reform within a systemic context has great moral depth to it. It addresses directly the learning needs of students and the professional growth of teachers, and enhances the role of the school as an agent of social change. Even more, moral purpose in education resolutely refuses to accept context as a determinant of academic and social success – acting on context, and not accepting poverty and social background as necessary determinants of success in schooling, is at the heart of the systemic approach to school transformation.

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Note

- ¹ See, for example, recent resources for personalised learning published on the Learning Wales website: <http://learning.gov.wales/resources/learningpacks/mep/professional-learning/research-informing-practice/personalised-learning/?status=closed&lang=en>