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Association of Directors of Education in Scotland

Making sense of reform: where next for Scottish education?

A think piece from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland

Introduction

Education reform continues at pace in Scotland. The Association of Directors of Education Scotland (ADES) plays a strong leadership role in shaping those reforms placing the learning needs of all Scotland's children and young people at the centre.

The Directors' Forum met in September 2018, along with senior Scottish Government officials and facilitated by Professor Chris Chapman, to consider the current challenges and opportunities.

This think piece continues the debate from *Towards A Learning System*[1] published by ADES in 2017. It draws together some key themes, issues, tensions and dilemmas arising from the ADES Directors' Forum. It seeks to capture some key messages and provide a stimulus for further reflection and debate about the thinking and practice that is required to take Scotland's education system to the next level of performance.

The think piece is structured into three sections. The first provides an overview of the key themes that emerged during the workshops and reflective sessions over the two days. The second highlights the issues, tensions and dilemmas associated with building a learning system and the final section offers some propositions for reflection to take the debate forwards.

Towards A Learning System aimed to set out a way forward – *Making sense of reform: where next for Scottish education?* challenges us all to take the ownership of change with a continued focus on improving outcomes for all Scotland's children and young people.

Maureen McKenna
President, ADES
March 2019

"Live the change, be the change you want to see"

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[1] https://www.ades.scot/Documents/Documentlist

Key themes

The discussion and workshops began to surface a number of key themes that highlighted the complexity of engaging and implementing reforms designed to empower a system whilst building capacity and maintaining coherence. These themes included:

Power of context

The discussions highlighted the diversity of contexts that local authorities (LAs) operate in and the very different challenges posed by these contexts. Such challenges include:

- *Geographical isolation-* with limited connectivity both physical in terms of transport but also technological in terms of broadband and the use of different platforms in some instances. This is a specific issue related to rurality that requires further exploration. There is excellent work underway on understanding rural poverty and sustaining education in rural communities through, for example e-Sgoil and deepening learning and teaching.

- *Concentrations of disadvantage-* in some areas there are concentrations of extreme poverty. These may be in small pockets in urban, town or rural settings or more widespread as is the case in Greater Glasgow. Whilst some analyses argue that there is more poverty out with these areas the evidence suggests that dealing with high concentrations of poverty in specific localities poses the greatest challenge. There we need to continue to target our efforts in these areas by ensuring that children and young people have access to the resources they need and the very highest quality learning and teaching. LAs have an important role in ensuring the equitable distribution of resources and brokering and facilitating the improvement efforts required through their work as RICs.

- *Variations in capability and capacity-* There is acceptance that there is variability across Scotland. This can relate to capacity and capability across the system. Financial challenges in LA budgets has caused capacity to reduce and this has had a negative effect on an area's capability or effectiveness.

Understanding the diversity of local authority (LA) contexts is a major factor in the successful implementation of nationally mandated reforms. Without such an understanding it is unlikely that the system will be able to work meaningfully with key leaders and stakeholders and ultimately the reforms will fail to have their desired impact. Put simply, we need to understand that what will work for one LA in one context will not work for another. Therefore, we need to develop a nuanced understanding of individual contexts, their strengths and weaknesses and most importantly their capacity for self-improvement. An understanding of these factors will support individual LAs and the system's improvement agents (LAs themselves, RICs, ES etc.) to accurately diagnose key issues and develop appropriate context-specific rather than one-size-fits-all packages of support to stimulate improvements.

Accountability vs. responsibility

The emerging educational landscape poses some interesting challenges around accountability. Simple hierarchical lines of line management and accountability mechanisms have been complicated by developments that have facilitated staff to work across a far greater range of boundaries than has been the case in the past. These networked systems and polycentric forms of governance offer significant opportunities for devolving decision-making, moving practice around the system and rethinking working arrangements. They also bring additional complexity to the system in the sense that we are developing a hybrid system which at one level continues to operate through hierarchical structures but has increased lateral capacity working across the system. This can blur lines of accountability or even create multiple accountabilities. In order to overcome some of the challenges caused by these developments it is helpful to think in terms of collective responsibility rather than individual accountability. If we can foreground collective responsibility as the key check and balance within our collaborative, networked endeavour then individuals will be less likely to revert to past behaviours when they meet challenges that require risk taking and innovative practice. Collective responsibility has the potential to be the glue that holds people together when the going gets tough. Conversely, if individual accountability has primacy it is likely to be the knife that breaks the links between people.

Relational trust and collaboration

The development of an empowered system is dependent on generating and sustaining high levels of relational trust and authentic collaboration. Relational trust supports the development of challenging conversations which are key to developing authentic collaboration. In this sense relational trust is a prerequisite for achieving higher levels of collaborative endeavour such as collegial activity (see below):

An escalator of collaborative endeavour

- *Association* - Traditional pattern of working with incidental meetings often initiated through a hierarchy, very little or no sharing of knowledge or resources.
- *Cooperation* - Short-term task focused activity around a specific issue incidental sharing of knowledge or resources on specific issues.
- *Collaboration* - More sustainable ways of working underpinned by a set of common values and commitment to share knowledge, resources and practice with some development of new practices
- *Collegiality* - Long term commitment to a shared enterprise underpinned by shared long-term vision and set of common values with a focus on sharing and developing new knowledge, resources and practice.

(after Ainscow and Chapman, 2003; West and Ainscow 2005)

Furthermore, collegiality is underpinned by high levels of social capital. David Hargreaves argues that social capital is a key characteristic of a mature self-improving system. Social capital is best summed up as trust plus reciprocity.

> *Reciprocity thrives as long as people can be persuaded to collaborate with one another to improve professional practice. Trust, however, is a more subtle concept and is established more slowly.*
>
> Hargreaves, 2012, p13

However, where the above social capital is low collaborative efforts are undermined and can lead to the 'dark side' of collaboration:

The dark side of collaboration
- *Illusion of association* - Passive buy-in creates the illusion of collaboration as a 'sleeping partner'.
- *Fabricated cooperation* - Pursue one's own agenda to enhance power, status or resources, often at the expense of others.
- *Collaboration with the 'enemy'* - Initial engagement to control damage limitation and influence the agenda to mitigate perceived negative consequences of the collaborative activity. However, despite intentions this often turns into collusion. One becomes trapped by the dominant discourse and taken in by it.
- *Contrived collegiality* - False public expression of values and belief systems that do not match the behaviours enacted by leaders or those involved in the collaboration. Particularly prevalent where unequal power relationships in bureaucratic hierarchies.

(Chapman, 2018)

In order to build authentic collaboration through collegial endeavour it is necessary to recognise the symptoms and signs of the dark side of collaboration. Without this awareness it is unlikely that actors will be able to build the necessary levels of social capital to achieve the desired outcomes of the collaboration.

Collaborative leadership for improvement

The central tenant of the current reforms is to develop an excellent and equitable education system that can support all children and young people (and lifelong learners?) to succeed irrespective of where they come from. One of the key mechanisms to make this happen is through the empowerment of different parts of the system to encourage more autonomous cultures with (hopefully) increased joint responsibility for decision-making and outcomes across a range of stakeholders. This requires leaders across the system to reject traditional forms of leadership that is based on positional power and hierarchy and adopt a collaborative stance whereby leaders model the values and practices of collaborative leadership in a range of settings across the system.

Put simply, we need a cadre of senior educational leaders who equally value and are equally well-equipped working with small groups of teachers, their peers, ministers and colleagues from other services and sectors. This will mean that our leaders will need to lead improvement efforts outside their normal operational space, hierarchies and across professional boundaries. Ultimately, this will facilitate the shift in ownership of the reform that will be required to embed and sustain the new ways of working in an empowered system.

Issues, tensions and dilemmas associated with building a learning system

The key themes of the power of context, accountability & responsibility, relational trust & collaboration and leadership for improvement are all associated with a number of issues, tensions and dilemmas that have emerged across Scotland's education system. These are the key factors associated with the successful implementation of the reform agenda. Taking each in turn:

Structural and cultural change - The pace of change has been rapid. Government has attempted to balance the structural changes and shifting responsibilities through their empowerment agenda to stimulate cultural change. This approach has involved driving change through challenge and support whilst holding the system together. A key dilemma for the system is maintaining the pace of change without eroding social cohesion at a time when structural change is perceived as threatening for local government. ADES members recognise their role in mediating centrally driven reforms and understand the importance of taking a coordinated and organised approach to this work.

Identity and agency - The reforms are uncovering a range of communities of interest and professional identities. As opportunities arise and resources are offered to incentivise change, different interest groups act to serve their own interests and reinforce their power and position. In addition to interest groups professional groups with different identities are also shifting behaviours and practice to align with the new landscape. The restructuring of Education Scotland and how this interacts with RICs and local authorities is an interesting example of a disruption within the system that will create new roles and responsibilities, ways of working and accountabilities across the education system. There is an opportunity for ADES to influence how best these new resources might be operationalised across the system. They are close to the problems of practice and well placed to advise on their deployment.

Leadership capacity - The reforms across the education system have exposed significant variations in leadership capacity and capability. Different parts of the system also have different views on how the system should move forward. For example, ADES argues that Scotland requires all levels of the system to be empowered rather than focusing on headteacher empowerment supported by legislative framework including a 'Headteachers' Charter'. The rhetoric about leadership and professional learning is 'rich' in terms of ideas and brands. The Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL) has been moved into the national improvement agency in an attempt to mainstream its early work. However, this move is relatively recent and there are local authorities and schools within the system that require support to build their leadership capacity. It would seem that support for this type of capacity building is variable and ADES members have a role in developing this type of systematic 'peer led' capacity building across the system.

Learning from elsewhere - Elements of the reform agenda can be traced to developments in other systems. For example, the RICs are similar in nature and intent to the Regional consortia in Wales, the Pupil Equity Fund is similar to the Pupil Premium in England and the proposed professional learning routes for teachers (Scottish Government, 2017) are similar to the career pathways of leader, master and specialist teacher in Singapore. It is important that the system looks outwards and takes policy lessons from elsewhere. However, it is also important to critically engage rather than policy borrowing without understanding the importance of context (Ochs, 2006). A further difficulty in taking a 'pick and mix' approach to policy making is the challenge of developing policy coherence whereby system developments are underpinned by a set of philosophically coherent building blocks rather than a mix of pragmatic responses that appear to offer technical responses. If the latter are to prevail then it is likely that social coherence will be undermined as philosophical and political fault-lines come to the fore when policies are tested in more challenging times. ADES members have a voice and key role in ensuring the system maintains its educational philosophy, values and coherence.

Primacy of learning and teaching - Some policies, particularly those related to closing the educational attainment gap between pupils from more and less advantaged backgrounds have been driven by the 'what works' agenda. While there are many positive attributes to this approach the danger is that the search for the ultimate evidence-based intervention becomes a panacea in itself. This issue combined with the on-going debate about curriculum development and Curriculum For Excellence, the innovative Scottish curriculum that was introduced over a decade ago, further compounds the distraction from building a cadre of teachers who are equipped to create excellent learning and teaching experiences for all of our young people. Put simply, even if you have the most advanced curriculum and the best evidence-based interventions if the workforce can't engage children and young people and build meaningful relationships in the classroom then learning will never be optimised. These basic relationships are prerequisites for thinking about how one facilitates excellent whole class interactive teaching or collaborative group work or scaffolds higher order questioning for different ability children. These are the skills and capacities that ADES is insisting the system should be instilling in its teachers.

Variations and complexity - As previously noted context is important in Scotland and there are a number of important variations. There are also a large number of groups representing parents, professionals, children and young people and other stakeholders. This presents as a complex and sometimes cluttered landscape with many voices, views and opinions. This creates a complex set of narratives about what 'might' and 'should' be done. The system also prides itself on involvement and consultation with stakeholders and consensual policymaking. While on one hand this is very inclusive and supports social cohesion on the other hand it can lead to inertia and slow down the change process or suppress innovation and risk-taking behaviours.

Reflections on moving beyond hierarchies: Possibilities and pitfalls

So, a complex educational reform agenda is surfacing a number of issues tensions and dilemmas which will either accelerate or undermine the implementation of the reforms. We can turn to Douglas's (1982) grid group theory and its application to public service organisations (Hood, 1997) to reflect on how these reforms may play out in practice.

Educational and wider public service reforms in Scotland (cf. Scottish Government, 2017; Christie, 2011) are attempting to improve performance of public services and outcomes for the citizens by shifting from a dominant hierarchical culture with its associated bureaucratic, managed organisations to a much flatter non-hierarchical culture with high levels of social cohesion manifested through partnership, collaboration and co-production between service providers (and the communities they serve) combined with fewer levels of rules and regulation in an attempt to promote greater flexibility and innovation across services. This will involve the system building an egalitarian culture with self-improving mutualistic public service organisations within an egalitarian culture.

These developments are not without risk. Central government is pursuing a set of reforms designed to give headteachers and schools more autonomy from local authorities and to encourage cross authority collaboration (Scottish Government, 2017). Some local authorities are becoming defensive, feeling threatened and disempowered by some of these developments (Chapman, 2018). These policies are testing existing levels of social cohesion within system and may lead to fragmentation and a breakdown in social cohesion.

Should this be the case, and relationships within the system begin to deteriorate, industrial relations may suffer and a fatalistic culture may emerge whereby organisations perceive government to be intervening without appropriate consultation or involvement of those responsible for implementing change.

The current administration has developed a 'draft' Education Bill, which could be interpreted as fall-back position to control developments through executive power and political management should the system not respond to the challenge of maintaining high levels of social cohesion whilst breaking down social regulation. Should this be implemented, and regulation increased, the likely effect would be a further reduction of social cohesion within the system leading to a fatalistic culture where uncertain organisations prevail. It is likely that this scenario would look back to the past with nostalgia, viewing the certainty of hierarchy as a safe and better system. This would be the likely result of system mismanagement.

The mosaic of policy developments with their issues, tensions and dilemmas that combine collaboration and empowerment may also have some unintended consequences that lead to an individualised culture. For example, the introduction of the Pupil Equity Fund, a direct payment to schools for their most disadvantaged pupils is inadvertently creating a market where a range of public, third and private sector organisations are competing to provide

improvement and consultancy services, some of which have been traditionally provided by the local authority or national improvement agency. This complex policy landscape could also be inadvertently opening up opportunities for individuals and organisations that did not exist in the past, and the vacuum is there to be filled. Given the Scottish education system's history, tradition, values and beliefs, this is the worst-case scenario for the system- a neo-liberal system by default. This would be the likely unintended consequence of system mismanagement. See figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Socio-cultural perspectives on reform and unintended outcomes

	Low social cohesion	High social cohesion
High social regulation	'Fatalistic culture' Uncertain nostalgic organisations Consequence of system management	'Hierarchical culture' Bureaucratic, managed organisations Status quo
Low social regulation	'Individual culture' Market-based state-funded organisations Unintended consequence of system mismanagement	'Egalitarian culture' Mutualistic self-improving organisations A learning system – outcome of effective system leadership and shared ownership of reforms

If the current set of reforms are to realise their ambition, and the reforms support the development of a self-improving or 'learning system', there needs to be careful consideration of the emerging issues, tensions and dilemmas associated with the implementation of these reforms. As well as, consideration of the likely unintended outcomes of miscalculating or unravelling the levels of social cohesion and regulation within the system. The lessons for Scotland are clear. Not only is system reform a complex and challenging task with many risks, it is also a largely social process where the shaping of cultures must be given primacy over structural change.

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Policy Scotland, University of Glasgow, April 2019

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