RESEARCH ARTICLE

Are two heads better than one? System school leadership explained and critiqued.

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'System leadership', as applied to the running of schools, refers to a form of leadership that extends beyond a single institution, where headteachers work with establishments other than their own. This approach is predicated on certain beliefs about the role and purpose of collaborative school leadership and management in a marketised system of state schooling and the benefits of a distributed and networked approach to school improvement. But what are the potential benefits and limitations of school system leadership? What normative interpretations of the system are best suited for purpose? This paper explores these issues with reference to the English school system, where system leadership is actively promoted by government through education policy and school reform. In order to do this, use is made of Gunter, Hall and Bragg's (2013) framework of distributed leadership in schools. The framework identifies functionally normative, functionally descriptive, critical and socially critical positions in the school leadership literature. The paper concludes by putting forward potential alternatives to the largely functional policy narratives and solutions of recent decades, which are based on a broader understanding of 'the system'.

Keywords

Collaboration, federations, leadership, schools**,** system leadership.

Introduction

Theories of 'system leadership' are conspicuous in current official discourse about school management, and are variously referred to as 'distributed leadership', 'system leadership' and more recently 'school-to-school support'. In England, school system leadership is the preferred option of Government and the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL), whilst on the international front it is most actively promoted by the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Pont et al. 2008a; Pont et al. 2008b). But how is this approach to be evaluated? In particular, what are its strengths and weaknesses? This paper provides some answers, beginning with a survey of what 'system leadership' means.

System leadership explained

'System leadership' refers to a form of leadership that extends beyond a single school, where headteachers work for the success of students in institutions other than their own (Fullan 2005). It is an approach to school management which stresses three things:

- schools are more likely to improve if they innovate collaboratively;
- such collaboration is empowering for the schools involved;
- reform, which is system-led, is more likely to be sustained over time.

These claims are especially evident in Higham, Hopkins, and Matthews (2009) *System Leadership in Practice,* which extols system leadership as a practical and

preferred response to the relatively independent, often disconnected, nature of schools, referred to elsewhere as the 'lonely organisation syndrome' (Hjern and Porter 1981). They are also writ large in official documentation issued by the UK's NCTL and academic specialists (Hargreaves 2010; West-Burnham 2011; Lieberman 2006). West-Burnham, for example, refers to various trends that point to an increasing imperative for schools to collaborate and work interdependently: a pragmatic and expedient response to a range of pressures, both internal and external; a moral imperative to serve the public good in pursuit of social justice; and finally a policy-based approach evidenced in *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE 2011).

Other reasons cited to support a system leadership approach include the capacity to create strategic alliances, to pool better resources and expertise, and to share more effectively good practice, costs, and risk. The potential here is for influencing the whole system, rather than individual parts of it in order to establish 'collaborative advantage' *(ibid,* 72*)*. It is such considerations that lie behind the 2010 Schools White Paper *'The Importance of Teaching'* (DfE 2010) which stresses the need for schools to explore new ways of working together in line with other public service providers. System leadership, then, in theory, allows for flexibility and greater responsiveness to change. This is facilitated by the recognition that system leaders must operate, not only within their own institutions, but in a collegiate manner, effecting improvement in standards across a network of schools that make up a local education system.

A good deal of stress in the literature is laid on the positive and sustainable benefits of system leadership. Hargreaves (2010), for example, notes the strengths of system leadership in the current context of government decentralisation. Positive definitions of system leadership, he claims, centre on the conviction that leaders strive for the improvement of *all* schools and students, not just their own, which includes a commitment to work together with other ones in order that they can be more successful. Allied to this commitment is a frame of reference that redefines the headteacher or principal as a 'servant leader' operating for the greater benefit of the education service as a whole. In this way system leadership and collaboration are presented as a kind of moral imperative.

Other perspectives from the NCTL suggest that the changes in both educational and political contexts, including notably concerns about under-achievement, call for school leaders to self-identify as system leaders rather than institutional ones. Articulating with the *Every Child Matters* agenda of New Labour (DfES 2003), system leadership is seen centrally as being about the potential impact of system leaders on the multifarious contexts in which learning takes place, and the necessity to collaborate with other institutions, professionals, and agencies to bring about improvement within them. As Carter et al. (2006, 6) argue, 'it is about exercising leadership in ways that demonstrates concern for all children within our orbit, not just those with whom we have a relationship of direct accountability.'

System leadership is also thought of as a development of school improvement initiatives with a particular focus on schools located in areas of

multiple deprivations (Fullan 2005). As political interest swings in search of sustainable school improvement, so attention shifts beyond those teaching and learning interventions that raise classroom achievement to an examination of the significant drivers for change, and the key personnel involved in implementing it and who help define the system.

Furthermore, Fullan (2006, 2) considers the call to turn around *individual* underperforming or failing schools as 'a dangerously narrow and under-conceptualized strategy.' The problem of failing schools relates, he says, to wider issues of the education system and societal development as a whole, leading him to conclude that the most effective system leaders are those who change the school systems in which they operate, reforming contexts as they help to solve the bigger problems within them (*ibid*). I will consider this important theme in more depth later on.

So it is that in recent years,school improvement networks in England and elsewhere have become a useful government mechanism for large scale change both in terms of policy and practice. Glazer and Peurach (2014:677) indicate how school improvement networks in the US function as

'…quasi-education systems within the parameters of the larger system, with a network provider (typically a non-government organization) developing and supporting school-wide designs for improvement' (*ibid).*

The success of these networks, however, depends on how they 'thrive in the' turbulent and unpredictable' (*ibid*) context of the education environment. This in

turn is further contingent on two significant factors: first, the capacity of network managers to negotiate this complex terrain and second:

> '…other key institutional actors, such as policy makers,
> philanthropists, and education officials whose actions influence the
> capacity of networks to develop and scale-up their school
> improvement programs' (*ibid* 678).

This suggests a significant role for other actors in the wider educational environment beyond school leaders, and the capacity to negotiate the intersections between them and emergent school improvement networks. Clarity over the precise nature of the 'system' referred to in system leadership discourse at the level of both policy and practice, whether school wide or beyond school in its scope would, therefore, be welcomed. In this regard it will be interesting to see how the intersections between school leaders and actors in the wider educational environment are worked out under the newly devolved arrangements of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) where the GMCA have been granted responsibility for a combined health and social care budget of £6 million (Association of Greater Manchester Authorities, n.d).Education, although not explicit within its remit, will inevitably play a part.

Clearly, then, there are many, almost self-evident, virtues in system leadership as I have described it. The benefits of such collaboration, including the sharing of good practice, educational values, expertise, and resources, are likely to allow for greater creativity and innovation. They also contribute to maintaining the sustainability of a school system where fewer deputies are willing to take on

the school leadership role. Perceived in this light, collaborative practice may be one way of spreading the expertise of fewer headteachers around more schools (Tunnadine 2011, 4). The systemic approach is both 'system wide' and 'system deep' (Hopkins 2006, 3),where system wide refers to the coherence and contingency across a policy spectrum and system deep refers to clarity and coherence at both the top and bottom of the system at the level of policy and in the minds of the majority of teachers. It is along these capillary lines that espoused aims and values for the whole system are therefore likely to be better channelled and absorbed at every level. Indeed, leadership of this kind becomes distributed through the school workforce and beyond, more purposefully, thus building capacity for future sustainability.

Evaluating system leadership

However, the concept and practice of system leadership is not without criticism and it raises a number of questions about its intellectual and practical antecedents, varying underlying assumptions and the validity of its claims. Much of the discourse cited above falls into what Gunter et al. (2013) term the functional position. This gives rise to both descriptive and narrative accounts where the descriptive focuses on the day to day activities of schools regarding 'tasks, organisation processes and relationships' (*ibid,* 560) and the narrative is 'about functional 'tasks' and the activity surrounding those tasks' (*ibid*, 562). It is these functional accounts that help construct a pragmatic notion of distributed or system leadership and provide the 'evidence' in support of its adoption as put

forward by proponents such as Higham et al. (2009); Hargreaves (2010); West-Burnham (2011) and the National College referred to earlier. Alternatively, the functional – normative position, as illustrated by Carter et al. (2006) and Fullan (2005), offers models and rationales based on a perceived imperative for school improvement. The role of the single leader is an accepted norm responsible for the distribution of leadership across other team members. For Gunter et al. (2013) the normative approach focuses on how and why distributed leadership should be adopted, emphasising the identification, development and retention of 'leaders of tomorrow' (*ibid*, 564). Such arguments can be found in literature, particularly that emanating from the National College and the OECD.

However, alternative, less sanguine, views of system leadership appear elsewhere in the literature. Gunter et al. (2013) identify these as critical and socially critical positions which, although having functional origins and sympathies, raise serious questions about the 'rush to acclaim and make claims for and about' a distributed model of school leadership, in particular how such models link with practice (*ibid*, 565). There is also a focus on locating analysis of system leadership in debates about power. First, system leadership looks more like 'social regulation rather than radical change' (Hartley 2009, 273). This view is based on Hartley's reading of Burrel and Morgan's (1979) typology, where the social regulation-radical change dimension is concerned with how society holds together and how it might be changed radically rather than merely reformed (*ibid*). If radical change is about replacing the *status quo* then social regulation is about maintaining it. Social regulation also suggests a concern for social order

consensus, social integration and cohesion as opposed to enabling structural conflict and change, modes of domination and exposing contradictions. Viewed in this light system leadership is an example of orchestrated, top-down policy to address an issue of government concern and maintain the *status quo*, rather than a radical, organic, grass-roots innovative action. The OECD (2008), for example, indicates that government promotion of system leadership in England is centrally about securing the right number of appropriately qualified and skilled individuals to be effective leaders and to iron out any existing disparities in leadership across the country. This is facilitated by the introduction of the National Qualification for Headship (NPQH), National Standards for Headship and the creation of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL, now the NCTL) as a way of providing schools with tools for improving leadership.

Second, Elmore (2000) has argued that "public schools and school systems as presently constituted are simply not led in ways that enable them to respond to the increasing demands they face under standards-based reforms" (*ibid*, 2).Most school leaders are recruited out of classroom practice and are therefore well initiated into the 'norms, values, predispositions and routines' of the school organization' (*ibid*). This suggests school leaders may be no better equipped to face the challenges presented by a bureaucratic, business model of targets and league tables than the organizations they lead. Thus, in England, as early as the year 2000, the then NCSL appears to have been initiated and funded by central government for precisely this purpose in that it was founded on the belief that dramatic changes were necessary in the way school leadership was

defined and practiced in a system newly orientated towards benchmarks and goals (Southworth and Du Quesnay 2008, 213). It is not insignificant then that the Coalition changed the status of the National College from non-departmental public body to an executive agency of the Department of Education early in 2012, later to merge with the Teaching Agency. The NCTL now has a centralized function of administering the training and professional development of teachers and headteachers and regulation of the teaching profession as a whole.

But, more crucially, strong links between system leadership and pupil attainment have yet to be empirically established. Leithwood et al. (2006) observe that as schools are held increasingly accountable for improving pupil performance in national tests, so school leaders (including system leaders) are under greater pressure to demonstrate the impact of their work on such improvement. However, hard evidence that supports claims about the impact of school leadership on pupil performance has been slow to emerge and is not wholly conclusive. Arguments that leadership generally offers a critical explanation for country-wide variations in school performance and pupil outcome can perhaps be made with greater confidence, although, again, the precise nature of its impact on individual performance is less clear. Citing studies by Hallinger and Heck between 1980 and 1998, Leithwood et al. (2006) refer to the direct and indirect effects of leadership:

> [T]he combined direct and indirect effects of school leadership on
> pupil outcomes are small, but educationally significant. While
> leadership explains only 5-7% of the difference in pupil learning

and achievement across schools … this difference is actually

about one-quarter of the total difference across schools (12-20%)

explained by all school-level variables, after controlling for pupil

intake and background factors (*ibid*, 4).

Leadership, on this basis, acts as a catalyst 'without which other good things are quite unlikely to happen (*ibid,* 5), but perhaps one that ought to be better understood.

The contribution of certain identifiable qualities or types of leadership, be they transformative, distributed, or systemic, is similarly opaque. Further research into the effectiveness of particular models of leadership , including system leadership, is required, together with a deeper understanding of what quantifies that 'effectiveness' specifically. Indeed, the OECD (2008) qualifies its understanding of system leadership as follows:

'when we refer to system leaders or leadership …we mean less the

action of individual leaders than the contribution of the actions of

individuals and groups of leaders in the context of a highly

supportive infrastructure (*ibid*, 410).

The question remains how to disentangle the various strands of personality, organization structures, policy and wider educational contexts, pupil cohorts, demographic profiles and models of practice in a way that makes understanding the contributions of models of leadership meaningful. One way of achieving this is to better understand the system to which 'system leadership' refers.

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What is the system?

Endorsed at the same time as a government policy agenda that pushed for greater diversity in the nature of state schooling, system leadership could be interpreted as the organizational arm of the school improvement and academies programme, particularly so since the Coalition government's continuation of this New Labour policy in its enthusiastic promotion of academies and the introduction of free schools *post*-date 2010. A policy endorsed by the new Conservative administration 2015 with a promise for a further five hundred free schools by 2020 (Coughlan, 2015).Yet, improving the overall system is unlikely to happen just by advocating the vision of a strong public school system; principals in particular may need to be more cognizant of the idea that changing their schools *and* the system are not different but simultaneous processes. (Fullan 2003,4).

If one key characteristic of system leaders is that they merely look at improving schools beyond their own institutions, this suggests a somewhat simplistic interpretation of what is meant by 'the system'. It is not clear whether such collaboration is meant at the local (either neighbourhood, county or local authority) or national level. Lessons from New Labour's *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003) agenda and the extended schools initiative point to a broader interpretation of 'the system' that purposefully locates schools within a wider network of children's services and demands new ways of partnership (multi-agency) working between the public, private and voluntary sectors. This creates working arrangements that are at once flexible and long-term and that require a

change of discourse. Atkinson et al. (2002, 225), for example, in their evaluation of multi-agency working noted the emergence of a new 'hybrid' professional type who had personal experience and knowledge of other agencies including their cultures, structures, professional language and priorities. New ways of working, including the adoption of jargon-free language between professionals from different agencies as well as with clients, became evident. Such changes often proved complex and time-consuming. Close, (2012, 123) argues, even so, that the imperative for this model of working remains.

Indeed, although schools have had a long history of partnership working (Mordaunt 1999), such trends towards collaborative practice across professional boundaries, are not restricted to the school context alone, rather they are representative of government public service reform under New Labour and beyond. Mordaunt (1999); Axelsson and Axelsson (2009) and Vangen and Huxham (2003) document the practice of collaborative or partnership working in the English probation service and health and social care. Axelsson and Axelsson (2009) claim this development is a result of the increasing specialization of welfare services and the similarly increasing professionalization of occupational groups engaged in their provision. Such tendencies are not only more common, but emerge from a perceived need for greater efficiency, and the creation of a 'seamless' service to clients (Vangen and Huxham 2003, 61). Coalition public service reform continues this trend as outlined in the *Open Public Services* White paper of 2011, and in spite of the failed attempt that same year to absolve from schools the duty to collaborate with wider children's services (Higgs 2011).

The new models of working engendered by this cultural shift call, surely, for educational leadership that extends across *both* professional and organizational boundaries (Close 2012, 125). This can be problematic, though Hood (2012) argues organizations can implement new managerial models that facilitate interprofessional ways of working. The adoption of children's trusts arrangements in children's services, part of New Labour's reform agenda are cited as an example. Here successive layers of multi-agency arrangements are envisaged as a quasi- ecological system of care (*ibid,* 6) based loosely on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model of child development where home, family, community, service and government structures interact at various levels and over time to support the child or family at the centre. In this context, system leadership offers yet another example of the managerial business model adopted in education; one that is applied to an equally tangled web of arrangements within and between schools and between schools and other organizations. Stephen Ball (2008) has begun to map these complex relationships across what he terms these 'new policy communities'. For Ball, the introduction of new actors, discourse and policy influence and enactment is noteworthy and further illustrates the organic and complex nature of public service provision.

There are, of course, serious complexities involved in collaborative or partnership working, whether in a hierarchy (achieved by superior levels controlling subordinate levels), in a market and in a network (achieved through voluntary collaboration between different actors). This latter approach refers to

horizontal integration in contrast to the vertical, top-down integration of a

hierarchical organization (Axelsson & Axelsson 2009, 322). Research,

particularly from the field of interprofessional working has developed our

understanding of the tensions, barriers and facilitators associated with

collaboration. These include issues such as professional identity, trust, language

and communication. Claims have been made about 'predatory partnership'

(Mordaunt 1999) based on the desire for domination and where the exercise of

power leads to the achievement of a controlling body. The commodities market is

cited as an example in this connection. But, whereas a single goal of lowest price

may be legitimate in the open market, it is not so healthy in the realm of schools

and public services. Frequent ambiguity about partners or the inability to specify

collaborative goals have also been negatively noted (Vangen & Huxham 2003).

Enacting leadership in collaborative settings is, therefore, highly

problematic, given that mainstream theories of leadership presume a formal

leader-follower relationship with specified goals that may not translate easily into

emergent collaborative systems or networks. Vangen & Huxham (2003) identify

the tension between a time consuming, facilitative, leadership role that

encourages collaborative working and the pragmatic leadership role required to

overcome the inevitability of working with members who are not 'on board', have

different needs and varying levels of commitment, or who are ill informed. What

they term 'collaborative thuggery' (*ibid,* 70) amounts to adopting a directive role

in order to get the work done, which may not always proceed in the spirit of

collaborative working practice. Complexity, highlighted at the abstract level of

territories, makes effective collaboration between institutions no easy thing to achieve. Axelsson & Axelsson (2009, 322) identify a typology of professional territories, organizational territories and professional bureaucracies. Professional territories link to different occupational groups and their fields of activity, often based on education, training and a license to practice. Organizational territories, on the other hand, refer to the units and levels of a bureaucratic structure. The organizational unit has a well-defined area of work and a manager with power and responsibilities that are regulated in a hierarchy of superior and subordinate levels. The manager controls the work of the unit and is in turn accountable towards his/her superiors. The manager is expected to be a strong advocate of the unit and to defend its interests like a territory. This may further imply the enlargement of the organizational territory (*ibid*). A particular form of the organization is the professional bureaucracy, which, because of its size, requires extensive administration. Within both the professional and administrative parts are different professional and organizational territories respectively, which may lead to territorial conflicts within both the professional and administrative aspects of the organization.

Reconceptualising the system

Based on the above analysis, the contention here is that the conceptualisation of 'the system' to which system leadership refers is maybe too narrowly conceived, being persistently reduced to school-centric aims rather than those understood by 'education in its broadest sense'. This last injunction anticipates a further one,

which is entirely theoretical rather than directly practical: is it possible to underpin better the system leadership prescriptions made by the likes of Higham *et al.* and the National College so that the worries expressed by Fullan - that they are insufficiently sociological - can be viewed in a more sophisticated light? Hjern and Porter's (1981) model of *implementation structures* suggests it is, insofar as it conceives of the agents of change within a local system entailing *both* a comprehensive and a collaborative matrix of potential influences.

Their model is helpful in three particular ways. First, it recognises the interconnectedness of the diversity of institutions involved in public service, and hence the existence of 'systems' *beyond* the natural boundaries of the school. Second, it distinguishes between *organisation* and *implementation* structures. While the former focus on individual organisations (such as a school), the latter draw attention to individuals and organisations involved in implementing policy initiatives (which may include members of the school). Implementation structures, therefore, involve a wider network of relations beyond any single institution. Third, they help determine what Hjern and Porter (1981) term as 'administrative imperatives' behind a policy initiative, drawing attention to the regulations and resources available, and the specific personnel who will be responsible for implementation. This means being able to identify a pool of potential working partners. It is the specific cluster of key workers from across partner organisations that represent the implementation structure itself. In this respect the model has close similarities with the organizational territories and

professional bureaucracies of Axelsson & Axelsson (2009) which I mentioned earlier.

The idea of implementation structures helps system leaders to identify what Hjern and Porter (1981) describe as *units of purposive action* - those administrative aspects as defined by the participating members. Such workers are tied both to their home organisation and to the cluster of colleagues who form the implementation structure itself. By way of illustration, a school may be concerned about the reading levels of a particular cohort of pupils. Part of the issue here is identified as poor levels of family reading in the home. The leadership team may adopt a policy of whole-school reading improvement measures that includes outreach to parents. They are also aware of other literacy strategies within the community that are able to contribute to this initiative, such as family reading time at the local library, basic skills in reading at the local FE College, and funded initiatives through the local children's centre. It is the schoolteachers, and those members of the library, FE College, and children's centre staff willing to be involved, who here form the implementation structure and the *unit of purposive action* within it.

Similarly, imagine a local authority that wants to improve the uptake of a family support initiative. Part of the policy is to heighten awareness amongst families with school-aged children. Reception and Key Stage 1 teachers in a number of primary schools in the area see engagement with this policy, albeit instigated outside of the school, as an opportunity to build stronger relationships with some families. Between them, the local authority and the schools have a

variety of goals and motives for engagement. Some members of the school staff may have little interest or involvement at all; but it is the policy itself that becomes of primary concern to the workers involved, whatever the key aims of their home institution.

So it is that Hjern and Porter (1981) are able to propose three key differences in the manner in which actions are taken in implementation structures rather than in a single organisation. In the former:

- there is a less formal structure and fewer authoritative relations;
- the social structures which exist are more dynamic and shifting;
- decisions to participate in a programme are 'fuzzy', based on consent and negotiation.

This suggests implementation structures are self-selecting rather than designed through authoritative relationships, and are more likely formed through the enterprise of individuals in relation to a particular policy. There is clearly some resonance here with Lave and Wenger's (1991) 'communities of practice' and the collegiate or federative approach to school provision discussed earlier in this paper. It also links to Bevir and Rhodes (2006) 'decentred approach' to interpreting the shift away from a hierarchical state to new governance in and by networks. This challenges the normative view that it is inexorable, impersonal forces driving the shift. Rather, governance is constructed differently by numerous actors operating against a background of diverse traditions (*ibid*, 59).

Instead of reducing the diversity of governance to a logic of marketization, institutional norms or a set of classifications or correlations, the decentred approach throws into relief the chaotic nature of multiple actors creating 'a contingent pattern of rule through their conflicting actions' (*ibid,* 62).

In offering richer pictures of the system in which schools operate, Hjern and Porter's (1981) model also illuminates the different types of engagement system leaders may have with the wider welfare services in a locality. As illustrated in my examples above, on some occasions the individual school may lead the initiative, drawing in, as appropriate, other schools, agencies and personnel in the community; yet, on other occasions, the school, or key personnel within it, may be drawn into initiatives generated elsewhere. This throws into finer relief the deeper complexities of 'the system', which is made up of a diversity of providers, and the potential for personnel, other than school leaders, to be 'system leaders' where the objective is to raise standards of education *and* wellbeing within a locality.

Lessons and implications

This paper has argued for a reconceptualisation of the system to which a current and popular model of school leadership adheres. System leadership has emerged largely in response to a search for sustainable school improvement, particularly at the level of national government. In England, the approach has been supported both by the NCTL and a Janus-faced, neoliberal national

educational policy that on the one hand pitches school against school in a local bid for pupils, funding and resources, whilst, on the other, demanding a collaborative exercise of school leadership, particularly in support of underperforming schools. One contention is that competition and collaboration are not necessarily polar opposites and can work together, exemplified in the London and City Challenges (Hutchings et al. 2012); countering even the stratification of the local school system that marketisation has brought in its wake.

Evidence from the Manchester City Challenge is but one example of this. Led by Mel Ainscow (2012), the programme sought to combine both school-based reform focusing on school improvement, together with a more comprehensive, system-wide reform that included all stakeholders at national, district, institutional and community level. The aim of this approach was to address some of the factors contributing to social, economic and educational disadvantage across the city. It is Ainscow's conclusion that two principal strategies, together, led to improvement. First, increased collaboration within the education system such that best practices were made available to a wider range of children and young people and second, the active involvement of community partners (Ainscow 2012, 295). The approach focused on four key elements – Leadership, 'workstrands' (collaborations across LA boundaries), 'keys to success schools' (traditional school-to- school support) and families of schools (networks and collaborations of schools). In other words, a system leadership strategy aimed at the movement of knowledge and expertise around the system, informed collaborations (including those that crossed LA boundaries) and school

partnerships. At the heart of the strategy was a careful analysis of local context and need.

Yet from a Gunter et al's (2013) critical standpoint, approaches such as the City Challenge look more like a neoliberal policy response to the very problems generated by neoliberalism. Introducing market principles of choice, diversity, bureaucracy and management into English education and public services more generally, since the late 1980s has changed the policy landscape. The private sector is privileged over that of the state and market arrangements are assumed to be better than state regulated ones. In essence this has intensified the stratification of society and the schooling system in particular. What counts as good education in the world of targets and league tables, acts as a positional good for certain groups of children and communities whilst disadvantaging others, hence the policy response of targeted interventions such as City Challenge. Where neoliberal governments are committed to 'the market where possible' and 'the state where necessary' (Crouch 2013, 26) alternative means of delivering state services are to be found. Under New Labour the drive was for modernisation and efficiency. While New Labour was perhaps considered too centralised and top-down in its approach and creating a passive rather than active citizenry, the UK Coalition have placed greater emphasis on networks and community involvement; 'Big Society not big government' (Painter 2012, 4). Thus, according to the Schools White Paper (DfE 2010) schools are to have greater autonomy, although of the 36 times autonomy is mentioned only on two occasions is it used explicitly in relation to head teachers and teachers, and once

obliquely to 'the front line'. Furthermore, such autonomy is to be tempered by rigorous accountability measures (ibid, 18).

Indeed, the notion of autonomy as promoted by Coalition education reforms refers to professional autonomy for teachers and school leaders, civic autonomy for communities to decide on the type of schools they require and moral autonomy to do 'what is best'. To some extent this can be evidenced though the promotion of academies and Free Schools - schools freed from local authority control and in the case of free schools, created in response to local choice. Such schools are also freed from the restrictions of the national curriculum, creating a puzzling division between those who have access to a body of knowledge, the concepts of which 'must be taught. And they must be taught to everyone' (*ibid*) and those who do not. But freedom *from* is not the same as freedom *to.* Limits and boundaries are set to maintain centralised control over the school system and education reform as a whole. It can be argued then, that policies such as the City Challenge which bring together, public, private and voluntary sectors in pursuit of the single goal of school improvement fit a centralised, neoliberal model of reform. The close relationship between school performance and local context, acknowledged in the City Challenge, has formed the basis of some of the criticisms levelled against system leadership. Fullan (2006) argues that, despite its many merits, system leadership *per se* fails to make any measurable impact on the socio-economic contexts in which schools are based. Such are the limits of a schools-centric approach to leadership and the system, even when that model extends leadership

responsibilities beyond the boundaries of the individual school. As Ainscow (2012, 307) has indicated, 'closing the gap in outcomes between those from more and less advantaged backgrounds will only happen when what happens to children *outside* as well as *inside* the school changes'.

It is in this regard that Hjern and Porter's (1981) theoretical conceptualisation of implementation structures offers a ray of hope. Application of the model by advocates of system leadership may encourage a more complex understanding of 'the system' and the diversity of roles schools can play in raising standards both locally and nationally. Certainly, it legitimises collaborative practice, not only between schools, but also across a range of services on a number of levels, sometimes on the basis of school-centred initiatives, and sometimes in relation to policy aims generated by other organisations for different, though complementary, ends. In this way, the model suggests not only a fluid and multi-dimensional web of interactions across organisations that make up the welfare system, including schools, but also the potential for building new communities of practice that can generate fresh ideas and offer challenge, even amongst the most successful institutions and organisations within the system. Above all it allows for that radical, activist, grass-roots innovative action referred to by Hartley (2009).

Furthermore, the reconceptualisation of system leadership along these lines implies that there is also a proactive role for local authorities, particularly at a time when their relationship with schools and national government is undergoing a period of rapid change. With an area-wide oversight, and a deep

understanding of their multiple communities, local authorities can help bolster this wider leadership perspective on the system, and develop new and existing collaborative relationships with other departments of local government. This could reap benefits not only in terms of school improvement, but also for positive change in local contexts, particularly in areas of socio-economic deprivation and challenge. In this regard, local authorities could act as gatekeepers for the new forms of knowledge and expertise generated through collaborative practice. Potentially, they hold a highly strategic position in the analysis and dissemination of such expertise.

Conclusion

A next step would be to research further the benefits of system leadership according to this broader understanding of the 'system' in which schools play a part. This is an under-researched and evaluated area that would benefit from further empirical enquiry. Research directed towards acquiring knowledge for understanding the interplay between network associations, professional territories and levels of professional bureaucracy would serve to indicate how strong the claims for schools system leadership in this context are. There is potential here for comparative study with similar developments in the field of allied health organisations, particularly empirical enquiry at the intersections between health and education or education and social care.

Research of this nature could throw open new possibilities for the role of local authorities in facilitating leadership in and for system wide school

improvement. *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE 2010, Para 16) anticipates local authorities as having a 'strong strategic role as champions for parents, families and vulnerable pupils … and developing their school improvement strategies to support local schools.' Subsequent policies comprising 'a lethal combination of savage cuts in their budgets and the loss of schools converting to Academies' (Hatcher 2012, 22) may appear to have reduced rather than strengthened any strategic potential for local authorities to act in this way. However, this is not to say they have no role within the new and reconfigured governance networks that are emerging to fill the vacuum. Local authorities have acted as depositories for community wide knowledge, skill and resources that are in danger of being lost unless new ways of constructing school system leadership can be found.

Finally, there remains a need for practical solutions to the dilemma of whether and how system leadership can be effective in a market-driven school service where there is an apparent disconnect between the rhetoric of decentralisation, autonomy and professional freedom and practice and strong centralised accountability. Forms of networked and federated approaches to a more localised schooling system may offer potential here. Above all, the aim should be to foreground a more critical position to system leadership, one which recognises that leadership does not happen alone but is realistic about the situated context in which such leadership and professional practice occurs. In other words a position that understands better the nature of organisations, power and policy and its relationship to practice. Here Bevir and Rhodes (2006)

decentred approach gains fresh purchase. Their advice for policy makers is threefold:

First, that the contingent nature of human practices challenges the idea of expertise as the basis for policy. Second that narratives and cases offer a different type of policy advice from the kind of expertise proffered by those who purport to provide comprehensive accounts and third, that the process of seeing differently is dialogic. It requires policy makers to engage in more dialogic models of policy formation that involve them in conversations with diverse groups of citizens (ibid,66). This recognises the complexities of a broader understanding of the schooling and education system, illuminated by Hjern and Porter's model. Only in this way will two heads, surely, be better than one.

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