

**GETTING IT RIGHT:
CAPACITY BUILDING FOR LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS IN EDUCATION**

Background paper for the OECD/Poland conference
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As education systems must increasingly respond to new societal, economic and individual needs, it is arguably the local level that is most challenged by these developments. It is at this level that education policies must be implemented, and it is here that they either succeed or fail. A key element of successful policy reform implementation is ensuring that local stakeholders such as policy makers, school leaders, teachers and parents have sufficient capacity to meet this challenge. In particular, they need adequate knowledge of educational policy goals and of the consequences that implementing these policy goals will have for their respective environments, and they need the tools to implement them as planned. Without these, the best policy reform risks being derailed at the level where it counts most: in the classroom.

Despite broad agreement on the importance this step, very often implementing educational policy goals on the local level is an unexpectedly difficult endeavour. Hidden within the implementation process are a number of difficult challenges. Two of the most important include: 1) raising teachers’ awareness and acceptance of proposed reforms, and 2) helping school leaders to understand what kind feedback they should gather from parents and teachers that will be most useful when forwarded to higher levels of educational governance – and how to do this. This last element, capacity building, is a necessary and crucial step that cannot be overlooked.

This background paper provides an overview of capacity building of local level actors and illustrates possible interactions among the various system levels. The discussion will concentrate on the possible needs and demands for capacity building of local level actors on the individual level as opposed to the institutional or system level. Given the OECD context the discussion is necessarily general, but, clearly, the elements of capacity building on the local level are very much context dependent. The precise mix of needs and actions in any given context will depend upon a number of factors, including:

- the density, size and composition of the population;
- the history, structure and culture of policy and decision making;
- the extent to which there is consensus on the reform proposed;
- the presence or absence of evidence for policy making, and the culture surrounding the use of such evidence;
- the level of empowerment of the individual local actors;

- the awareness of existing local capacities and needs for capacity building.

Capacity building: Definitions and background

In very simple terms, *capacity building* can be described as the process of helping local actors to acquire and use information relevant to successful policy implementation. Access to this information and understanding how to use the information are defined as “knowledge” (Fazekas and Burns, 2011; Hess and Ostrom, 2007). Capacity building strives to find better and more efficient ways for different actors to access and use knowledge in local educational contexts in order to achieve desired outcomes.

Target groups for capacity building can be divided into individual, institutional and societal levels, all of which are strongly interrelated (UN, Economic and Social Council, 2006). In education and the public services, the definition can be extended to include the system level. In this case, capacity building is defined as follows for each of the different levels:

- **Individual level:** Finding ways to support individuals (parents, teachers, headmasters and local policy makers) as they face the demands of new developments in the local context by building on existing knowledge (human resources and knowledge management).
- **Institutional level:** Supporting existing institutions in forming policies, effective organisational structures and good management (this includes building learning organisations).
- **System level:** Finding efficient ways to support system level actors (*e.g.* policy makers, teacher unions) to be able to fulfil their roles in designing/implementing/evaluating etc educational policies.
- **Societal level:** Striving towards more interactive and responsive public administration.

Capacity building takes place on two dimensions: *vertically*, through interventions from other levels (for example, from central government to local or vice versa). It is important to recognise that this is a bi-directional process and that capacity building in both directions (*i.e.* from the central and regional levels to local level as well as from the local level to the regional and central levels) is important for efficient education governance. Capacity building can also take place across a particular level with different stakeholders, *i.e. horizontally*. Horizontal capacity building involves sharing experiences and knowledge of efficient ways of implementing policies into practice and also sharing outcomes of the implementation.

Key elements in both an individual’s and an institution’s capacity building are:

- access to information;
- the ability to use the given information efficiently and as intended; and
- reinforcing desired changes in behaviour to build new reflexes and new patterns of working.

The following sections discuss needs for capacity building on the individual level among various local actors such as policy makers, school leaders, teachers and parents, as well as key themes for each of those actors.

Policy makers, experience-based knowledge, and evidence-based policy

Local policy makers often need to serve as mediators between other local level actors as well as those at regional and central levels. One of their main tasks is to provide upper levels of government with knowledge of what is actually happening on the local level, and what the needs and challenges are of day-to-day education. In order to do this, they use different sources of knowledge, including the experiences of local actors in defining and solving problems in schools and classrooms. It is important to facilitate and strengthen the ways in which local educational policy makers gather and transmit this feedback and knowledge to other levels of government. The source of the knowledge (*e.g.* practitioner expertise, programme evaluation, parent committee reports, etc.) is also key. Without strong knowledge gathering and transmission on the part of local policy makers, emerging policies and their implementation will be lacking an essential element of feedback.

Being able to do this is a nuanced skill and process which requires local policy makers to have the requisite connections to relevant stakeholders, the forums and capacities to gather this information, and the ability to formalise and make explicit what is often tacit or procedural knowledge. While this is often overlooked, some countries have put considerable resources into facilitating such forums of exchange and capacity building for local policy makers. Germany, for example, launched a federal programme called “*Lernen vor Ort*” (Learning on the Local Level) in 2009. This programme brings together 46 operating foundations in education which help 40 model communes to manage their education programmes and build networks for knowledge transfers across regions. Although a relatively recent initiative, this is one of a set of promising programmes across OECD countries that explicitly try and build capacity in this area.

Another prospect for capacity building for policy makers is the importance of appropriate and thorough policy evaluation and assessment. Too often the evaluation and monitoring component of a reform is not given the time and resources it really requires; new programmes are planned before the evaluation is complete, or an evaluation is cut altogether due to budget shortfalls (OECD, 2009). Currently the OECD is conducting a review of evaluation and assessment frameworks in education, which explore how systems of evaluation and assessment can be used in order to improve the quality, equity and efficiency of school education in different educational settings. This project will provide an important set of knowledge of the state of the art in educational evaluation and assessment, but also highlight areas for potential capacity building for policy makers, as well as schools, teachers, and other system variables (OECD, forthcoming).

A related area is the use of research evidence in policy making. In many OECD countries the gap between educational researchers and policy makers is wide, and the role of research in shaping policy is inconsistent or weak (OECD 2007, 2009). Although it is now common to refer to “evidence-informed policy making”, the term actually reflects a variety of different processes and uses of evidence, not all of which would be considered as real examples of the process. Yet accessing, understanding, and interpreting research is a difficult task, and one that cannot be learned overnight or without explicit training. Capacity building in this area thus includes fora that bring together researchers and local policy makers to share relevant research and discuss applicability to policy needs, training policy makers to interpret research, and providing structures (*e.g.* brokerage agencies) that help to strengthen the links between policy and research, assess legitimacy and rigour of the research, and build cooperation and trust (OECD, 2007).

School leaders, empowerment, and accountability

The key challenge for capacity building for school leaders is to find efficient ways to answer the following three questions:

1. What are the responsibilities of school leaders?

2. To whom should they be accountable?
3. What available resources do they have?

School leaders are responsible for student achievement, the working atmosphere of teachers, and the overall character of the school. Strong school leaders excel through good personal leadership skills, managerial quality, and the strategy and vision to face the challenges and new developments of their school. Leadership skills can be developed through practice and by building a personal way of being a school leader, but they can also be nurtured and developed through formal training. Managerial and strategic skills require similar kinds of reinforcement and learning. Systems with strong school leaders deliberately seek to build a cohort of exceptional leaders both through ongoing formal training and through venues where they can update their skills through research-based knowledge and also by sharing experiences with others in similar positions.

But, with freedom comes responsibility: To what extent should school leaders be accountable to different stakeholders? School leaders link teachers, parents, and other community stakeholders, as well as higher-level policy makers. In this sense they play a key role as mediators and knowledge brokers on both vertical and horizontal dimensions. They also can lead the school and teachers by setting expectations and priorities: for example, in supporting the use of research in practice or encouraging groups of professional learning and action research by teachers. Key issues in capacity building are how school leaders are being trained and assisted by other actors in the process, as well as the level of autonomy they have in their role.

In Singapore, for example, school leaders are chosen from the pool of teachers. Those with leadership potential are fast-tracked into leadership positions and provided with mentoring and professional development. All potential school leaders take part in the Leaders in Education Programme (LEP), which is a six-month full-time program. The focus of LEP is not on technical administration skills but rather elements of leadership, critical self-reflection, and integrating experiences and beliefs that can be used throughout their careers. The emphasis on constant learning and professional evolution is very concrete: school principals are kept in their post for 5-8 years, after which it is considered they will have had their maximum potential impact in a school. They are then either promoted (*e.g.* to superintendent), redeployed to another school, or rotated to the Ministry to work on policy issues. Throughout the process there is support and capacity building both through a network of peers and formal training opportunities.

Re-defining the role of teachers as education professionals

Teachers are facing new developments that require them to revise their role as education professionals. A key element of this is that parents and parental associations are increasingly involved in schools, and venues of informal learning (*e.g.* internet, social media, private organisations offering training, hobbies) are more present in students' everyday life. Capacity building among teachers is related to their increasingly demanding role *vis-à-vis* parents and other stakeholders (including media). It is also related to the extent that they are deemed accountable for certain phenomena (*e.g.* bullying inside and outside school, teaching children with special educational needs, having gifted children in the classroom, parental involvement in the school work and curriculum work). One of the most difficult questions to solve is when it is the teacher's duty to apply for in-service training in order to be more capable of facing these challenges in the classroom, and when it is more reasonably the responsibility of other actors (school leaders, boards of education, other specialists, parents).

Box 1. TRUST

One of the key elements defining the interactions between local level actors is trust in the educational system: Can parents rely on equal quality of teaching and learning across schools? Do teachers have similar working conditions and rewards? How are organisational stakeholders being included in the decision-making processes? And how worried do stakeholders have to be about corruption in the system?

Trust is an underlying element to all system functioning that manifests itself in different ways across different contexts. In Finland, for example, the trust in teachers is so strong that school inspections do not even take place – instead, the system functions by trusting in a high level of professionalism and professional ethics of teachers and school leaders. In many other countries, school inspections are a tool of quality control that may or may not indicate a lack of trust, and trust in school actors (for example) is manifested in autonomy in curriculum design and planning.

Trust in the system impacts not only the functioning of the system, but also the actions of individual actors in the system. For example it affects:

- the educational planning of students and their parents
- the functioning, status, and professionalization of teachers and school leaders
- consensus building across multiple stakeholders and different levels of government

Another element of capacity building is to give teachers the research tools for action research and self-reflection. In many countries, the teacher is still seen as an educational authority whose input carries a lot of weight and thus an extra burden is placed on them to avoid inadvertently contributing to discrimination or prejudices. For example, teachers may have lower expectations regarding school achievement for children from immigrant backgrounds with low-level language skills than they would for their native speaking peers. This may seem to a teacher like an intuitively correct assessment and response, but, in the long run, these kinds of expectations can – however unintentionally – contribute to reproducing the social position of the child as an underprivileged adult who will still have to face the same challenges and requirements in the job market.

The everyday practices in school – which themselves act as implementations of educational policies, albeit on a different plane – have an impact on the thoughts and actions of parents and students. Teachers can play a key role in providing adequate information to families from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may not have the requisite capacities or knowledge to navigate the educational system as well as they could. In order to do this, though, teachers themselves need to be provided with sufficient research-based knowledge concerning possible consequences of their expectations and actions (as well as non-actions), particularly for students from disadvantaged families. They also need to be challenged to engage in critical self-reflection in terms of their expectations and assumptions for students, as many of these biases are unintentional. Recent research from Canada has shown that even student teachers who believed they did not alter their expectations or grading based on student background characteristics were actually (and completely unintentionally) devaluing the performance of students from Aboriginal backgrounds (Riley and Ungerleider, 2008).

Capacity building for research and self-reflection is key here. In Finland for example, the teacher education programme promotes strong pedagogical skills and teaching based on research. Finnish teachers hold a master's degree in pedagogy, but it is not the degree alone that makes them good teachers. Rather, their teacher education trains them in research and reflection. They are required to search, criticize and apply existing knowledge about classroom interactions and other school-related topics and to use this

knowledge in their own teaching as the basis of their actions in the class room and in school in general. And the effort does not stop in pre-service education: as new knowledge on pedagogy is being produced in different research institutions every day, Finland's in-service teacher education also includes current educational trends and research. This strategy is core to a teacher's professional identity and is promoted and supported financially by the state and the municipalities.

Parental use of educational possibilities: Emerging inequalities of capacity

As stated previously, families have different economic, cultural and social capital (see Bourdieu, 1984; 1986) and resources, all of which play a role when it comes to the quality of education provided to their children. This means that in most countries upper middle-class and middle-class families (or parent(s) with higher education, higher professional positions and good income) are the ones that are most aware of how to actively use the education system for their own interest and benefit (Taylor, 2009). They are also more likely to have the capacity to lobby and press for change in the educational system through policy and practice reforms (Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995, van Zanten, 2003).

In practice this means that middle-class parents are more likely than parents with less income to use school achievement and school performance data, when available, in order to place their child in the strongest schools. If changing schools is not possible, middle and upper-class parents are more likely to demand (and successfully lobby for) change in the system. Parents with lower income (including, in many countries, high proportions of immigrant parents) are less likely to be aware of their rights regarding school choice and may often lack the capacity to use achievement and performance data. Over time, the "bad" schools will increasingly consist of pupils and, in many cases, also of teachers, who have not actively chosen to be in the school in question but have either had no choice or have not been able to choose otherwise. An unintended effect of this pattern is a vicious cycle that reproduces inequalities in and through education, although of course from the viewpoint of middle-class parents they are just doing what they think needs to be done: providing the best possible education for their own children.

In order to come up with the best possible outcome for their child's education (*e.g.* making the best possible choices, seeking prestigious institutional routes, avoiding "bad" peer groups) these parents are becoming more demanding and adept at using multiple sources of information. This information includes *cold knowledge* such as school achievement data, school rankings, and teacher qualification information, as well as *hot knowledge*, that is, information about schools' reputations, grapevine information, and information about the social and ethnic composition of the peer group in the school and in the classroom. In terms of capacity building, it is important to try engage and inform less active parents (*e.g.* often those from disenfranchised groups) of the choices and possibilities to which they are entitled. Engaging and building capacity includes providing links to networks of parents, and also discussing access to and use of achievement and ranking data.

Providing sufficient information to parents from under-privileged groups is as important as engaging and informing parents from advantaged groups *e.g.* through parental associations with the evidence-based knowledge of the consequences of their own actions when using the policy-implementations. In France for example (Raveaud and van Zanten, 2007) there is a trend for well-informed middle-class parents to choose the local school with a mixed peer group instead of making a school choice to a selective school. These sorts of processes that eventually promote equality in education and help to prevent the increase of social segregation start at the grass-root level by informing the parents from the advantaged groups, and of course by ensuring similar quality of educational provision across schools and districts.

Questions for discussion

In general, the needs for capacity building presented in the previous sections are strongly interrelated and can be grouped for discussion purposes as follows:

Experiences on the local level as the basis of developing new policies and empowerment

- In your country, how do local level actors receive feedback on their actions, and what sort of guidance/explicit capacity building is given if needed?
- What are the resources provided for particular groups (*e.g.* for school leaders) and how are they strengthened?
- How are higher levels of government gathering and mobilising the valuable experience of local level actors, and what are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?

Evidence-based knowledge and capacity-building

- Are there structures in place that facilitate local level actors' access to evidence-based knowledge relevant to educational policy and practice (for example, brokerage agencies, websites, for a, etc.)?
- What is the role of central and regional actors in providing context-relevant, evidence-based knowledge and encouraging the efficient use of this knowledge on the local level? How can this best be championed/reinforced?

External and internal challenges in constructing efficient governance

- To what extent should relevant organisational stakeholders (*e.g.* student and parent associations, NGOs, associations of local and regional authorities, etc.) be included in capacity building on the local level?

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