PART III
Chapter 11

The Management of Learning, Schools and Systems

by
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Abstract. Hirsch writes this chapter as the rapporteur of the December 2001 international conference on management and governance in education. The conference discussion built on the OECD/CERI 2000 “What Works” study on innovation in school management in nine countries. The Budapest conference, reports Hirsch, emphasised the centrality of management issues to the future of schooling. It examined these issues first at the “micro” level of the classroom and other learning environments, then the management of schools as organisations, and third the “macro” issues of educational governance and public reform. He concludes from the conference that improvement in how students learn is always shaped by the ways in which schools themselves develop as learning organisations. They are complex entities to manage but are not unique in this respect, with scope for adapting models of change developed in other sectors, both public and private.

1. Introduction

Issues of school management are intricately wrapped up in wider issues about schooling. The OECD’s study of New School Management Approaches (OECD, 2001d) underlined that good management is about much more than finding strong and effective individuals to run schools: it is about improving the organic development of the school itself. The follow-up Budapest seminar to this study emphasised the centrality of management issues to the future of schooling. Teaching, learning and managing education have become inextricably intertwined. The seminar examined these issues first at the “micro” level of the learning environment, then by considering the management of schools as organisations, and finally considered “macro” issues concerning educational governance and public reform. These three levels themselves interact considerably.

Hungary’s education minister, József Pálinkás, introduced the discussion by describing how the country is endeavouring to create new kinds of learning and new processes to achieve it. In the past decade, Hungary has decentralised its education system, and is now preoccupied with the challenges of meeting demanding learning outcomes and quality standards within decentralised structures. A new curriculum and assessment system aims to combine managerial autonomy for schools with an approach to learning content that allows schools to develop more useful curricula, with greater emphasis on competencies for lifelong learning, and less on the reproduction of knowledge in university-imposed end-of-school examinations. At the heart of this is a redefinition of teacher competencies and career structures.

2. Creating and Sustaining High Quality Learning Environments

“For a century”, declared Mats Ekholm the head of Sweden’s National Education Agency, “education has been about the transmission of knowledge from old to young heads; only recently have we started to teach students how to learn”. Across OECD countries, educators are trying to engage students more directly in learning, to make them co-workers with teachers in the learning process rather than just recipients of knowledge. “Real schools” are places where real learning takes place in the sense that students do things because they are interested not because they must. Alexandru Crisan from Romania, whose system was in the past governed tightly from the centre, saw
gradual decentralisation as a prerequisite for creating and managing an effective learning environment. It depends not just on the centre letting go, but also on building capacity in institutions to enable teachers and students to be in greater control of learning processes. Zoltán Poór from Hungary reflected on the associated challenge of developing autonomous personalities, capable of setting specific aims and objectives, of defining the content of learning, and of identifying their own needs.

There was thus some consensus that new kinds of learning relationships are desirable in 21st century schools. There was also a strong sense that change in this direction is slow: the traditional model – the teacher in front of the classroom – still very much prevails. At the same time there was some questioning at the seminar of whether more open methods of learning are always preferable to the tested, tightly structured approaches; what works in a given educational setting cannot be prejudged. Part of the challenge for schools is to evaluate approaches as they unfold, and be willing to adapt them in the light of outcomes, as well to apply multiple strategies as appropriate to different contexts. In other words, schools themselves have to be good at learning.

This underlines the importance of ensuring that training and development give sufficient attention to managing the learning environment, implying new types of relationship between students, teachers and managers. They must each develop greater autonomy. Autonomous learners must, for example, be able to identify their own objectives and to select appropriate tools for meeting them. Teachers, in their turn, have to take responsibility for their own work and help to formulate the curriculum rather than just acting as agents for the system. School managers have to be able to deal with staff with a variety of attitudes and skills, and to reflect on their own performance.

Thus, new approaches to managing responsibilities in schools are linked to approaches to student learning. In the process of leading schools, principals need to understand how factors connected with engagement help to motivate teachers and students. Evidence presented to the seminar suggests that the relationship between strong leadership and good student results is not a direct one. Australian research presented by Bill Mulford (the “LOLSO” project) shows that leaders operate in a complex web of relationships in which good leadership helps foster the kind of school climate in which learning flourishes, rather than directly inspiring students to achieve: “Organisational learning, or a ‘collective teacher efficacy’, is the important intervening variable between leadership and teacher work and then student outcomes.”

That principals’ influence on learning works indirectly rather than, for example, as a direct inspiration on students might seem self-evident, yet in recent years the emphasis on the role of the school leader has led some to pin...
excessive hopes on the charismatic principal. This has rarely provided a long-term solution to schools, and has sometimes even proved counter-productive. The achievements of magnetic leaders tend to fall away after they leave, unless their approach has worked through to the transformation of others. Certainly some of the best examples of successful school management identified in the OECD’s study involve team approaches. But, as was pointed out at the seminar, this does not just mean building a cohesive team of senior managers. Some believe that the key is to extend the responsibilities of ordinary teachers beyond the context of their individual classroom to make them part of, and make them feel part of, the management of change. In this context, the single most important reform identified by the Hungarian Education Minister was the creation of a new career structure for teachers with varying levels of responsibility, pay and status at each career point.

Two particular messages can be reiterated: first, good management and leadership do make a clear difference to learning outcomes; second, managers need to operate cleverly within a complex set of relationships rather than seek simplistic solutions. School managers at every level need to deal with the complexity resulting from the multiple stakeholders and processes involved.

3. Managing Schools for Complexity and Change

The second seminar session considered management in schools in the context of societies and systems undergoing rapid change, including in decision-making structures with many responsibilities devolved to schools. The relationships between the school and the wider community interests become critical in this new environment, adding to the complexity of a school’s mission. These challenges were explored in detail in OECD’s report on school management (ibid.) that served as a key reference document for the seminar. As one of its main authors, Dale Shuttleworth set out in introducing the session, new political and societal demands are being made on schools, often provoking a sense of perpetual pressure or crisis. School leaders may well feel that these new demands are not being matched by support and resources needed to meet them. Yet, there are also many instructive cases of schools responding to new challenges by effectively changing the ways in which they work.

The Hungarian government has recently emphasised quality improvements in school education through its Comenius 2000 programme. This provides a national framework for school level initiatives, based on the assumption that quality assurance concepts developed in industry can be adapted for application in schools. An important aspect of this approach is the use of consultants from a range of backgrounds including the private sector. The programme involves a three-fold model, with the key principles laid down
The first aims to create a commitment to stated goals defined in partnership with local communities to meet relevant needs. The institution should develop and introduce a documented quality management system, which covers all the processes capable of influencing the educational and teaching activities of the institution, with appropriate assessment, feedback and control mechanisms. The second is the implementation of total quality management through the creation of learning organisations, whereby the management of the institution should consciously develop its organisational culture by involving staff members, with systems and processes specified to do this. The third is the dissemination of this process throughout the system: the management and staff of the institution should be able to apply the “plan-do-check-act/standardise-do-check-act” (PDCA-SDCA cycle) continuously in every area of the institutional operation.

These processes are by no means unique to Hungary. Some countries have attempted to engage a wider range of external expertise in helping to improve quality. The Flemish Community’s education system in Belgium, for example, has been keen to bring in skills of outsiders. While school managers must be formally trained teachers, they may be outsiders who have left active teaching, and the system has asked a private management consultancy firm to draw up job descriptions incorporating a competency profile based on discussions with panels of employers, principals and teachers. The United Kingdom government wishes to engage the private sector in the provision of public services where it can improve delivery, which can be controversial. In education, for example, private sector companies have been brought in to provide services on behalf of local education authorities that are failing or severely under-performing. Recently, three schools in difficulty in the county of Surrey have been entrusted to private companies contracted with the local education authority to improve performance in return for an annual management fee.

It is one thing to elaborate a model for change and quite another to implement it successfully. The seminar discussion brought to the surface a range of difficult issues that need to be addressed. One derives from the challenge of becoming less insular. Schools can benefit from working not just with those from other schools but from outside the education sector altogether. Yet, it can also be difficult, and not just because of cultural resistance by educators. For instance, outside consultants need to understand the intricacies of schooling and the constraints of education policy. Nevertheless, there was optimism about the benefits to be gained from looking beyond established recruitment sources for school managers. One participant suggested that recruiting managers without professional teaching experience could have a twofold benefit. First, being detached from the teaching profession can make it easier for such managers to be more directly
accountable for outcomes; second, their presence could help schools deal with some of their outside partners, for example, other public sector organisations such as health or social services.

Perhaps the biggest challenge relates to how schools as organisations go about learning. In working with others inside the education sector, the challenge of “horizontal learning” from colleagues — within and beyond the same school — and hence of networking is crucial. To be effective there will often need to be an important culture change, in which classroom teachers learn to work in collaboration with colleagues to a far greater extent than in the past. The systematic approach of identifying goals, analysing what needs to happen to meet them, and openly monitoring progress while learning from one’s mistakes requires a very conscious effort by school managers, as this has tended not to be established practice. Politics and the policy-implementation processes of education do not always make this easy for schools, as their efforts to develop as organisations are overlaid by many external demands and day-to-day pressures.

3.1. Openness and accountability...

An important tension in managing education as a public service arises from the need simultaneously to be effective in producing desired outcomes and to be open about the processes through which these outcomes are realised. The honest self-evaluation that is essential to a learning organisation can create problems for bodies that are publicly accountable and vulnerable to the charge of failure. At the same time, a school cannot easily keep its operations secret. Different countries have responded in different ways to these dilemmas. In some, there is still confidentiality surrounding information designed for internal monitoring. In others, there is a legal requirement to publish results. The transition from the first situation to the second can be accelerated by the assertion of the public’s “right to know”. In the Netherlands, for instance, a newspaper went to court to oblige schools to publish results that had come from a benchmarking exercise not designed to produce public comparisons.

The seminar discussion suggested two possible ways of addressing this problem. The first is to develop assessment tools that are more consistent with the goals that schools want to reach. Publication of crude tests of students’ performance may sometimes create perverse incentives if they are not accompanied by wider outcome measures. The OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a step in this direction and includes measures of student characteristics as learners, but a still wider range of indicators would include non-cognitive outcomes of education. Even were assessment instruments perfectly matched to a school’s objectives, there
may still be a disincentive for a school to look honestly at its performance as part of the improvement process.

A second part of the solution therefore needs to be to regard failure in a more constructive way, as sometimes occurs in the private sector. For failure to be seen as a normal part of experimentation, a new political discourse would need to understand educational initiatives, in systems and schools, as part of a continuous learning process, rather than each being sold as a guaranteed recipe for success. Some progress has been made in this direction over recent years, but more remains to be done in creating a sophisticated set of instruments for correcting and learning from failure in an open environment.

3.2. … experimentation and innovation

- “We are still structuring classroom instruction around a nineteenth century model based on single-teacher classes and short subject periods. We need to try out other models to see what works.”

- “Teachers are constantly being subjected to new initiatives and change. Most of these initiatives fail to produce what they promised, or are quickly superseded by the next fashion.”

These two (paraphrased) attitudes present conflicting perspectives about the desirability of implementing radical change. On the one hand, it is identified as urgent and not to be ignored; on the other, schools already achieve huge tasks in terms of socialising children and providing stability in often fragile communities. It is certainly not easy to “start again from scratch” in designing the logistics and methods of schooling without endangering this stable set of functions, but this is not to deny the value of change.

In confronting this dilemma, the seminar reflected on the distinction between piecemeal initiatives and a genuine process of experimentation. When political initiatives are piloted, for example, governments, local authorities or schools must be prepared to abandon what does not work and to build on what does. This means accepting that just because a new educational idea is intuitively attractive, this does not mean that it will work or be appropriate in all circumstances. As regards evaluation, it may take so long on grounds of rigour that by the time it appears it has little scope to influence the project in question. New approaches are required to produce independent yet timely assessment of whether changes are working.

A related issue is how successful innovation is disseminated. The Hungarian model puts a strong emphasis on active dissemination across the system, as do initiatives such as Beacon Schools in the United Kingdom. But, can the broader need to ensure that change is not fragmented and that the best gets disseminated be reconciled with local autonomy? Squaring this
circle depends importantly on the strength and success of networking mechanisms. A major task for governments is to build and support these linkages, rather than trying to impose innovation by decree. The seminar also showed some enthusiasm for cross-national dissemination of successful innovation – participants acknowledged the extent of change from the days when lessons from other countries were of only incidental interest. For example, the close attention being given to the international benchmarks represented by the recently-published OECD/PISA findings is indication of the extent to which educational change is already being judged in cross-nationally, as well as in national and local frameworks.

3.3. System-wide “macro” issues, reform and governance

The final session in Budapest tackled the broader horizon of management and governance at the system level: decentralisation and its implications, and the main currents of public management reform relating to education. This theme overlaps with the previous one, since the “system” level of public management cannot easily be distinguished from the “organisational” level, especially in decentralised systems. The focus on governance was understood not just in terms of the formal structures and directions given by governing bodies and central agencies but also of how multiple stakeholders’ views and interests help govern a school’s actions and objectives.

Introducing the session, Professor Ron Glatter from the UK’s Open University argued that education governance is relatively neglected compared with management: “Theories of management abound, those of governance are few.” Getting to grips with governance is not easy. He outlined a wide range of governance arrangements in different countries categorised as competitive markets, school empowerment, local empowerment and quality control. The four models do not exist anywhere in pure form but are combined in differing degrees. Which model prevails shapes which type of leadership is appropriate, although sometimes school managers feel themselves pulled in several directions simultaneously. This framework raises the question of the degree to which different models can compete, conflict or co-exist.

A great deal of the seminar discussion analysed decentralisation, in terms not just of its benefits but of the tensions it can create. In most countries recently, power has been flowing away from central management and towards local control in the governance of schools. In some countries, this has been overlain by new forms of assessment mechanisms and centrally defined outcome and accountability requirements. In others, including Hungary, there has been a concern that decentralisation might initially have led to standards becoming less even and a reduced capacity to meet system-wide goals. Kari Pitkänen of Finland’s National Board of Education emphasised
the degree to which education remains a public issue backed by a national educational strategy.

Countervailing the trend to decentralisation, however, is an emerging supranational agenda. As regards Europe, certain of the principles underpinning this were outlined by Guy Haug for the European Commission, especially in relation to key goals such as the development of skills for the knowledge society, the specific development of ICT competence, and the need to focus on science and technology. The pursuit of this agenda is voluntaristic, based on agreements among countries to share functions, develop common instruments to monitor progress, share information, and to establish Community-wide action where this is perceived to add value. These common interests – as reflected in the Budapest event itself – have now grown strongly and with it the pressure for collaboration at the international level, for example in the dissemination of good practice.

In seeking to reconcile decentralisation with overall system quality and objectives, each country is having to work out new sets of relationships. The result, according to one participant, is that the “rolling back of the state” is being combined with a “rolling in of new, dispersed forms of control”; as another put it, that the attempt is made to “re-establish control where accountability has been devolved”. This can create contradictory pressures and tensions, as well as multiple forms of governance and control. Very different mechanisms for maintaining quality are appropriate compared with in the past. The Hungarian model of establishing quality-management processes in some schools and then spreading good practice is a far cry from a centrally managed system. However, when it comes to who decides, for example, what is in the curriculum, a stable model has yet to emerge. In Finland, the movement is currently towards greater school autonomy in curriculum matters, while other countries such as the United Kingdom have opted for a centrally defined model, even though presently they are looking for ways of encouraging local diversity.

The position of local authorities and other bodies between the central state and the school has become uncertain. While some seminar participants saw them as useful mediators between central requirements and local priorities, the importance of this mediating layer has in many countries been reduced. There are other forms of mediator, such as Hungary’s education ombudsman, whose role deserves further attention. The boards and other bodies directly governing schools, which are the mechanisms through which local communities have a stake in the running of schools, have not been adequately studied, either. For the principal and other school managers, running a school means negotiating with multiple powers that each have a stake in the governance of education, rather than simply asserting the
school’s autonomy as an independent unit or following the orders of a single authority.

4. The Route Ahead

This seminar underlined the fact that it is impossible to detach the improvement of the ways in which students learn within schools from the ways in which schools themselves develop as learning organisations. Schools are complex entities to manage but are not unique in their complexity, and there is scope for adapting models of change developed in other complex sectors, both public and private. There are multiple pressures being exerted on education systems, raising acute tensions for those who manage them. With no clearly defined route map, and no ideal model of teaching practice, educational structures, or other elements that make schools work, change cannot be a linear path towards clear predefined models. It needs to progress along a route in which the map is constantly being refined. Even so, there are likely to be certain stable signposts. One of these is the centrality of genuinely participative teamwork in the running of any successful school rather than relying on a few charismatic leaders. Engaging all the staff does not preclude hierarchical relationships, but cannot take place without a shared sense of mission and responsibilities.

Two particular tensions stand out on the route ahead. One is between constructive evaluation and accountability. Can organisations learn effectively when they are in the spotlight? A more tolerant attitude towards short-term experimentation (and hence possible failure) may help, but at a political level this is hard to achieve. Second, there is a tension between the radical change required to foster “real learning” and the need to preserve stable, workable systems for instructing children. Apart from the political resistance to radical change, the scale and complexity of the educational enterprise in practice constrain the speed at which such change is feasible.

And what of the people who will have to follow this route map, and to revise it en route? What is needed beyond a pedagogical leader is someone capable of making complex systems work – able to listen, negotiate and steer while keeping sight of the organisation’s fundamental goals and values. It may thus be as important that those who work in schools and systems should better understand the principles of good public management as it is that they should improve their understanding of how students learn.