Reflections on the change leadership landscape

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Introduction

The ideas presented in this paper are designed to help education leaders lead change and improvement. Leadership is about enacting the moral purpose of education reform – raising the bar and closing the gap for all children. Realising moral purpose – actually accomplishing it in practice – is at the heart of effective leadership. This paper is supported by practitioner case studies or ‘change stories’, with links to resources offered by the National College and other organisations, as well as opportunities to link with practitioners engaged in change activity. A menu of these resources can be found at www.nationalcollege.org.uk/changestories. We also present a six-component change leadership framework that is designed to enable leaders to understand effective leadership, learn how to become better leaders, and to guide effective action in addressing their own change challenges in the settings in which they work.

What is this paper about?

There is so much written about change leadership that it is difficult to see the wood for the trees. In our recent work, we have established a new set of underlying assumptions to guide the would-be change leader (Fullan, 2010a; 2010b; 2011; in press):

— Practice drives practice and theory
— Leaders need to focus on a small number of key factors
— The speed of quality change can be greatly accelerated by leaders working across groups of schools and children’s centres

This paper:

— explains what we mean by the three basic assumptions
— considers findings on school leadership in a nutshell (not to be exhaustive but to get at the essence of what matters)
— proposes a framework and related learning approach that will help current and future leadership
— is linked with online resources that help illustrate how the framework can be used to gain insights about leadership

Who is it for?

This paper has been developed in collaboration with school heads, middle leaders and children’s centre leaders. We have worked with leaders from a range of these settings to create change stories that exemplify the basic assumptions. Moreover, our framework for the leadership of change in practice can link easily to the change work of other agencies across the sector such as the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) and the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People’s Services (C4EO).

There are a growing number of examples of effective change leadership and improvement across clusters of schools and between schools and families and communities. This has generated specific knowledge about effective leadership within and across institutions. The task now is to clarify the knowledge base, make it more accessible and create opportunities for current and future leaders to learn from it.

Three basic assumptions

We think that the advice to leaders is getting too voluminous, not just in total but also in single sets of advice. We doubt current effective leaders became successful by studying the research literature. It is not that the research literature is unhelpful, but rather that it needs to be put into perspective so that individual change leaders can learn to become more effective in practical, meaningful ways. Our intent is to place the leader in the driver’s seat, in charge of their own learning while collaborating with others.
Assumption 1: Practice drives practice and theory

The first premise is that practice drives theory. Asking the question of how to put research into practice is putting the matter the wrong way around. Putting practice front and centre is to pose the question, ‘Now that I am working on a problem, how can research, including other leaders’ practices, help me?’ Note also the question is not just about how to learn from other leaders’ experiences, but how to make your learning needs the focal point and then expand your learning. Strange as it sounds, pursuing research and theory is not the best way to become a better leader. Pursuing your own and other practices, informed by research and theory is a much better bet. Effective leaders learn from their work and from other leaders – and sometimes learning is from seeing what doesn’t work as much as what does. This assumption is at the heart of the professional learning purpose of this paper and the online learning resources that accompany it.

Assumption 2: Focus on a small number of key factors

Second, there is a small number of core leadership qualities that characterise the effective learning leader. Thus our framework identifies a set of powerful, inter-related factors (six to be precise). In helping policymakers and practitioners bring about change at the school, local and national level, we have found that focusing on a small number of high-leverage factors is the best and most effective way to get substantial improvement. Leaders who integrate core factors, pursue them resolutely and stay on message are more likely to be successful.

Assumption 3: We can greatly accelerate the pace of change by leaders working together across the school system

Third, the speed of quality change is characteristic of the new leadership we are seeing. The idea here is to help leaders focus on a small number of key priorities (goals and strategies), do them well with relentless consistency, learn from their experiences as they go, and get success that begets more success. Effective change becomes both deeper and more widespread when leaders work with other leaders within their organisations and across schools, agencies and in the system as a whole. At Debden Park High School, for instance, the support of a national leader of education has stimulated speedy improvement:

‘Debden Park High School provides an outstanding quality of education for its students. The school was the subject of special measures following its inspection in January 2007. One of Her Majesty’s inspectors removed the school from this category in October 2007, after one monitoring visit...The improvement since the last inspection has been significant and much of the school’s work is now exemplary...The school’s success is a product of the very effective senior leadership team. Under the direction of an exceptional headteacher, and with considerable strategic support from the Kemnal Trust [a national support school], the school has become outstandingly effective.’

Ofsted inspection report for Debden Park High School

In literacy and numeracy in Ontario, we have also seen cases where schools have moved from terrible to very good within one year, and certainly within three, by focusing their own work and linking with other schools. In our work across Ontario and the US, we examined 6 districts that have improved substantially in virtually all schools in the district (districts with between 15 and 190 schools) within 3 or 4 years. Ontario as a system (comprising 2 million students, 4,900 schools and 72 local authorities) improved significantly within 3 years.

Leaders, in other words, should look for and learn from examples of high-quality change that show substantial improvement in fairly short periods of time.
Change leadership: findings from schools research in a nutshell

In this section, we sample the best and clearest findings on effective school leadership in order to understand the key knowledge that leaders need. There is encouraging consistency here that enables us to zero in on the essentials. The recent work by Tony Bryk et al, Viviane Robinson et al, Chris Day et al, Ken Leithwood, and Robert Hill and Peter Matthews are all excellent cases in point.

Tony Bryk and his colleagues have been tracing the progress of more than 500 Chicago public schools involved since 1989 in the Consortium on Chicago Schools Research. In their latest book, Organizing schools for improvement, they compare 100 elementary schools that had experienced significant progress in student achievement over time with 100 matched schools that were stagnant or declining (there are some 440 elementary schools within Chicago's system). In brief, the 100 successful schools had 5 characteristics that the unsuccessful schools did not – one driver (i.e. the principal) and four things the driver did, namely:

— parent and community ties
— the professional capacity of staff that develops the knowledge, skills and professional learning communities of teachers
— a student-centred learning climate
— a focus on teaching that includes curriculum alignment and targeted resources

These key focuses are consistent with core activities in the National College change stories, but they are missing one key component. Because Bryk et al's research only examined intra-school development, the authors did not address school-to-school or school-to-district relationships. In other words, they did not examine leadership across the school system. Incidentally, there was no clear system-wide development strategy in Chicago and that is why they only got 100 schools being successful instead of 440 (high schools did not improve much, but that is another story). In any case, Bryk et al help with some clear, longitudinal findings compatible with our change stories.

Second, Viviane Robinson and her colleagues recently completed an impressive best evidence synthesis study (Robinson et al, 2009). They found five key leadership behaviours, one of which was twice as powerful as the other four:
The one factor that was twice as powerful as any others is number four: the degree to which the principal participated as a learner in helping teachers figure out how to make improvements (our italics). We see a strong overlap with Bryk et al, although once again we see the limitations of just examining intra-school phenomena. Significantly, the new reality of school leaders is to engage with the outside; indeed to make the outside part and parcel of the inside.

Third, other prominent researchers both individually (Chris Day, Pam Sammons, David Hopkins and colleagues in the UK; and Ken Leithwood et al in North America), and together in a recent major report (Day et al, 2009), drew similar conclusions relating to the impact of leadership on pupil outcomes. They identified eight leadership components:

- defining the vision
- improving conditions for teaching and learning
- redesigning organisational structures, roles and responsibilities
- evaluating teaching and learning
- redesigning and enriching the curriculum
- enhancing teacher quality
- establishing relationships within the school community
- building relationships outside the school community

Again, these conclusions are essentially compatible with others we cited, but with more emphasis on the external or system factors. Concerning the latter, because much of the wider literature on change leadership focuses on intra-school development, we need to highlight the growing importance of outward-facing leadership and school-to-school support which are emerging in different forms — through leadership of small federations, school collaborators, system-wide improvement, and increasingly those pertaining to multi-agency forms of leadership in integrated children’s services.

Robert Hill and Peter Matthews have written about how struggling schools progress faster when they are supported by excellent leaders who, as it were, moored their outstanding school alongside one that was marooned or sinking and offloaded systems, skills and expert practitioners to get it moving in the right direction’ (Hill & Matthews, 2010).

Hill and Matthews reviewed the evidence of the National College’s work with national (and local) leaders of education since 2006. National leaders of education (NLEs) differ from support models that rely on consultants or advisers who have left the front-line of school leadership. Instead, NLEs draw on the capacity of their own schools (national support schools or NSSs) and the current practice or skills of their senior and middle leaders and expert teachers whose contribution to achieving improvement is fundamental.

There are currently over 400 NLEs that have supported over 500 schools since the first NLEs were appointed in 2006. The National College plans to have 500 NLEs supporting schools by the end of 2011. There is strong evidence that this approach is helping to significantly improve primary, secondary and special schools.

For the 55 secondary schools for which there is evidence for over 2 years, the average rate of improvement is more than 5 times the national average. There was significant improvement in over half of these schools. Of the 27 primary schools for which there are data, the rate of improvement was more than 4 times the national average. And the 14 low-attaining primary schools all improved, by an average of over 25 per cent.

The impact of NLEs has not been confined to improvements in exam performance. Hill and Matthews show that NLEs are:
— developing and extending support for primary and school improvement
— contributing to the development of academies
— developing federations, trusts and chains or accredited groups of schools based on their improvement methodology
— helping to establish the concept of national teaching schools
— developing strategic and advanced leadership skills and contributing to policy development through the NLE Fellowship programme

In addition, local leaders of education (LLEs) have evolved from being a means to support schools in the three City Challenge areas of London, the Black Country and Greater Manchester to being a national resource and an important part of the school improvement landscape with strong evidence of success (Matthews, 2010). In all of these examples, outward-facing leadership towards and partnership with other schools resulted in a successful turnaround.

We ourselves filmed two very clear examples of this recently. One concerned a federation in Hackney where the local authority had supported a small federation of initially two schools through its learning trust. In addition to supporting each other, the schools also helped turn around other schools in special measures. It is very clear that the leaders in these schools see their responsibility beyond their own schools, and are talent-spotting and developing other leaders who are committed to working in this manner (Fullan, unpublished). In each case, a substantial turnaround from failure to success is clearly demonstrated.

Another example of outward-facing leadership can be seen in Tower Hamlets. School heads across the authority have strong mutual allegiance. They are quick to speak and act in ways that recognise that mutual assistance is both a moral and a practical virtue. School heads and local authority leaders attribute the success to the strong peer support culture across the authority. Tower Hamlets has gone from being one of the poorest performing authorities in the country to being equal to or above the national average on virtually all measures of achievement (Fullan, unpublished).

There are many strong examples of school and school system improvement, including a growing number of examples of multi-agency partnerships. But our reading of the change leader landscape indicates that practice rather than research per se is the liberator, and thus we have to figure out how to engage current and future leaders in improving their own practice. In sum, if we take the literature on leadership as cited in this section, we believe that the core qualities of effective change leadership in practice are clear and small in number.

Change leadership in practice: a framework for action

Taking all of the above, we have developed an integrated six-factor framework that we believe is inclusive of the domain knowledge, and which is amenable to learning how to become better at the work, for example by examining informative case studies, and by applying the ideas to one’s own development and change situation. The framework is portrayed in figure 1.
Our aim is to provide leaders with a mental navigation tool that will help guide thinking, learning and action. Because we want it to be something you can hold in your head, it is simple and visual. As we go about our business of leading really effective change, we can (in the moment) keep a mental check on which element(s) of the framework we are addressing. We can use the framework to analyse the practice of others (either through reading our change stories or as we work alongside other leaders) as we learn to become better leaders of change. The framework can also be used to frame and develop your own school improvement plan according to the six main components: purpose and direction, core business, organisational improvement, developing others, outward-facing leadership and professional learning.

The six components are deeply inter-related. First, research shows that effective leaders articulate clear purpose and direction. Second, standing at the heart of all activity is the core business of improving teaching and learning in schools and child welfare and development in children’s centres. In order to achieve this, a third set of enablers must be addressed that concern the organisational conditions under which improvement best occurs. Fourth, for the organisation to move forward, leaders must be engaged in developing others. This collaborative or distributed leadership is essential to success. Fifth, there is strong evidence that outward-facing, school-to-school leadership is required in order to create conditions for sustained improvement.

Finally, it is very clear that effective leaders are learners as they go. They don’t know or think they know the answers in advance but they see themselves as having the leadership qualities to learn, listen, empathise and problem-solve as they address challenges. As they grow as leaders, they become increasingly aware of what it takes to become a better professional. They are always learners, but the most effective leaders become more and more confident leaders as they learn from experience. Professional learning is built into their modus operandi. Leading change in practice requires continuous professional learning on the part of leaders engaged in working on their own change challenges whilst learning from others.

Putting the six elements together, the bottom line is that leaders who exemplify the framework in action generate greater school, community and system-wide improvement on a continuous basis. Moreover, in recent research it is clear that accomplishing or realising moral purpose is a far greater motivator than moral exhortation or reams of irrefutable evidence that success is being obtained elsewhere in similar circumstances. In other words, the greatest energiser is actually doing successful work. Leadership is above all about helping others within and across schools to experience success and obtain results in one’s own situation (Fullan, 2011).
Purpose and direction

Schools and children's centre leaders are concerned with the overarching commitment to serve the needs of all children. It is this commitment to raise the bar and close the gap that governs all activities. Not only is their moral purpose clearly and repeatedly expressed, the direction and means by which the purpose is to be achieved are articulated.

Core business

Intertwined with moral purpose is the core work of improving teaching and learning. This includes the essence of teaching and learning and the work of children's services, including the integration of these two components. Thus, the essential practices that focus on the development of children are centred here: assessment practices, teaching and learning activities, support for pre-schoolers and their families, and the like.

Organisational improvement

The rest of the framework is about what leaders need to do to realise success. The research we cited earlier can be boiled down to four further inter-related elements. Organisational improvement involves the structures, conditions and circumstances that make the work more efficient and effective. This might include: acquiring resources, communication throughout, student behaviour and climate, embedded planning time, leadership structures, and so on.

Developing others

Developing others is based on the powerful research and practice findings that effective leaders build the capabilities of others. This includes leaders supporting the development of practitioners and other leaders through coaching, mentoring, courses, daily feedback and working together. Developing others also includes focusing on the quality of all people from the selection process onwards - teachers, childcare workers, support staff, caretakers and others.

Facing outward

Facing outward is about wider leadership involvement. It relates to participation in and contribution to multi-agency co-ordination, learning networks, federations and system-wide leadership. This domain also recognises how effective heads address multiple external demands, initiatives, policies and so on. It is one of the most powerful new leadership developments we have seen in the past five years.

Professional learning

Finally, professional learning is embedded in the framework because effective leaders see themselves as continuous learners. The best leaders are learners within the framework so to speak. One thing should be noted at the outset. Effective leaders are not born - they learn to become more and more effective through reflective action. In other words, the reader should appreciate that early in their careers, leaders who eventually become more and more effective had to learn to become that good. In most cases of success, we see the results of years of learning. Most case studies do not attempt to capture what those leaders were like when they first started but it is important for leaders early in their careers to appreciate this fact.

The key question is, ‘How can leaders learn the ideas and skills embedded in the actions within the framework?’ Successful change leaders constantly cycle back and forth between understanding and acting on the change challenges in their context. They seek to understand practical challenges and the needs of people and how to respond to those needs. They reflect on their actions and their role in improving things. It also involves self-reflection on one’s qualities as a professional and as a human being, for example, how I model self-awareness or positive regard to others, display empathy, stay on message, and so on.

The National College web pages associated with this paper provide further examples and links to material that support each of these elements. The online resources also provide change stories reflecting the change journeys of real leaders from a range of different contexts (middle leaders, headteachers and leaders of children’s centres). There are also templates to help you construct and analyse your own change story.

A menu of these resources can be found at www.nationalcollege.org.uk/changestories. Please see your programme handbook for further details.
In conclusion

In sum, the elements of the framework for action are closely inter-related. All six components have to be fused in action. Leaders have told us that the framework is a helpful aid for learning about your own leadership, performance management and as a template for developing and monitoring improvement plans. Leaders develop best if they examine the change stories of others, as well as their own challenges, in order to understand change, diagnose the needs of the organisation, identify specific challenges and carry out and learn from action.

There is no substitute for actually doing the work, guided by other leaders, and by the framework we have provided here. Informed practice drives practice. Experiencing success and helping others to do the same is at the heart of realising success, and forming the foundation for doing even more (Fullan, 2011).

It should be clear that everyone should and can exercise and improve his or her own leadership. This is no time to feel that only other seemingly accomplished leaders can solve our problems. Opportunities for improving our change leadership capacities are accessible to all of us. The framework we have provided is designed to place the learner in a position to lead his or her own change efforts in a manner that begets success. Developing your own leadership qualities is essential, and the online resources and related forum are designed to be a resource to enable you to become more effective as a leader.
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