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Education Reform: Are We on the Right Track?

By Michael Fullan

In assessing the status of education reform in Canada, I consider two halves of the problem, and then their relationship. The top-half concerns provincial policy and other state level frameworks and structures. The bottom-half involves communities, schools and local jurisdictions. How each of these halves develop, including rapport between them is crucial.

THE TOP-HALF: POLICY FRAMEWORKS

The main question about state policy for reform is essentially: do relevant, inspiring, clear policy frameworks exist in the main domains essential for serious reform of the education system? I am not able in this article to conduct an inventory of all main policies across the country, but it is possible to sketch out the main domains and to make an assessment of the relative strengths of each of these areas of development. The four main policy areas essential for substantial reform in my view are: curriculum and instruction, assessment, teacher education, and community development including early childhood education. A few words on each.

Curriculum and instruction, particularly at the elementary level is increasingly on the right track, i.e., across the country curriculum documents are becoming more clear, reflect best ideas in the different areas of learning, link goals and outcomes better, refer to key instructional methods, and provide sufficient flexibility for teachers, schools and districts to adapt or

develop local versions. Secondary school curriculum reform lags behind in development in many jurisdictions, but it too is now receiving stronger attention. So, I would say that by and large we are "on the right track". Later I will question whether the train has left the station, but that is an implementation question.

Similarly, assessment policies are increasingly robust. One of the advantages that Canada has, compared to the U.S., is that we came later to assessment, thereby avoiding or minimizing many of the pitfalls of high stakes testing. The technology of assessment is growing in sophistication, and there is a much better fit between what is in the curriculum and what is being assessed. Again, we are not yet talking about implementation, but the potential for doing good is there. The same cannot yet be said about the remaining two areas of policy.

I once called teacher education (initial and continuing learning of teachers) the worst problem and the best solution. Somehow from a policy point of view teacher education remains politically unattractive. Across the country there are the barest of structural requirements addressed in policy. These requirements of courses and certification are necessary and can do with tightening up, but they are at the lower end of the Maslow hierarchy of teacher renewal. We did a report for the Ford Foundation last year in which our brief was to examine teacher education in the U.S.¹ We drew two conclusions: One, that we know what the main components of reform should entail:

- * A stronger knowledge base for teaching and teacher education;
- * Attracting able, diverse, and committed students to the career of teaching;
- * Redesigning teacher preparation programs so that the linkages to arts and sciences, and to the field of practice, are both strengthened;
- * Reform in the working conditions of schools;
- * The development and monitoring of external standards for programs as well as for teacher candidates and teachers on the job; and
- * A rigorous and dynamic research enterprise focusing on teaching, teacher education, and on the assessment and monitoring of strategies.²

The second conclusion was that there is significant policy action underway in the U.S., especially in relation to the follow through of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, (although success remains to be seen). We captured this in our title *The Rise and Stall of Teacher Education Reform*. In Canada, the first half of that title is yet to happen. It is true that the qualifications of the teaching force in Canada are better on the average than in the U.S., but without significant new policy development we will squander the tremendous demographic opportunity (and crises) for reshaping the teaching force over the next few years.

Finally, community development, including early childhood policy, are not very far along. We have school councils, which can be useful along the way, but are superficial manifestations of what would be needed to direct policy toward community mobilization. Early childhood policy is similarly underdeveloped, although it is receiving some lip service recently. Unlike

teacher education, early childhood should be more politically attractive. European countries have recognized the critical importance of investing in serious early childhood policy expectations and incentives, but so far Canada lags far behind.

In brief, then, taking these four key policy domains, we appear to be on the right track in two of the areas, but not in the other two.

THE BOTTOM-HALF: LOCAL LIFE

As I said earlier, being on the right track doesn't mean that anything is moving. We know a fair amount about local implementation. The policy arena and local life are divergent worlds if not two solitudes. We do know that local implementation depends on the development of learning communities (collaborative cultures) at the school and local district levels. When learning communities do develop they make a powerful difference. The broader research literature is conclusive in finding that teachers, principals, parents and others can make a significant difference in student learning if they do three things, (a) work together to (b) focus on best pedagogy that is fuelled by (c) a close look at what students are learning and motivated to learn. The Manitoba School Improvement Program (MSIP) is a good case in point (see also the article in this issue by M. Zimmerman & L. Lee). Under conditions of local external pressure and support, teachers in several MSIP secondary schools become energized to focus on student learning and engagement, to make changes, and to get results.

More often than not this doesn't happen. Teachers fail to make the effort, or their commitment to making a difference turns to despair in the face of overload and political alienation. Agencies like school districts, teacher unions, universities either become part of the problem or fail to help.

Incidentally we have many more examples around the world of individual schools becoming successful (for a time at least), but only a few examples of entire school districts becoming successful. Achieving larger scale reform is the new agenda.

Local life to me is really a matter of how compliance expectations and capacity development play themselves out at the school and district levels. Compliance requirements involve what schools are expected to do by way of policy. One necessary but not sufficient ingredient of being on the right track is the way in which policies represent wake-up calls for local educators to pay attention to key aspects of reform, such as the four policy domains discussed in the previous section — only two of which seem to have the presence and clout of a wake-up call. Capacity has to do with whether wake-up calls result in people getting out of bed and doing something. Capacity consists of the motivation, skills and resources (time, materials, access to expertise) required to implement a given course of action.

I have oversimplified because quite often local innovators lead or are otherwise ahead of policy, others willingly exploit the latest policy, i.e., the policy plays into capacities or propensities they already have. But more often compliancy and capacity are at loggerheads and nothing happens but the dissipation of energy and growing mutual alienation.

TOP-HALF/BOTTOM-HALF RAPPORT

Getting on the right track involves addressing the incredibly difficult matter of developing rapport between top-down and bottom-up strategies. J. Micklethwait and A. Wooldridge remind us of two problems that plague public policy-making:

The first is that the state is an incredibly blunt instrument; it gets hold of an overarching idea and imposes it without any sensitivity to the local context. The second is the desperate craving of politicians for a magical solution.³

Put another way, the state gets preoccupied with "adoption" — getting the policy on the books — and at best leaves implementation to compliance strategies that can never work because they neglect (in fact adversely effect) the very capacities which are essential to success. Andy Hargreaves and I outlined several ideas for governments to pay more attention to capacity-building by investing in mid- to long-term development that increases the ability and motivation of people to do the job.⁴ It is not that the compliance instincts of policy-makers are wrong, but that they must counterbalance or integrate these with capacity-building policies, incentives and support — things that governments are not traditionally inclined to do, or are not good at. I believe, however, that more and more leaders are realizing that they must take a longer view by incorporating capacity-building strategies and giving up on the notion that there are shortcuts. For example, many leaders are now appreciating that policies on student assessment can and should serve both the accountability function of making everyone aware of how well students are doing, and the implementation function of developing strategies to make improvements based on the results.

At the same time, local educators have their responsibilities. Teachers, administrators, parents and students can't wait for the system to get its act together. Indeed, it is by taking action despite the system that plants the seeds for system breakthrough and change. Thus, our *What's Worth Fighting For Out There ?* contains action guidelines such as the ones for teachers: make students your prime partners; respond to parents' needs and desires as if they were your own; become more assessment literate; refuse to mind your own business; develop and use your emotional intelligence; help to recreate your profession.⁵

Ultimately, for reform to be successful we will need to coordinate and otherwise establish rapport between simultaneous top-down/bottom-up strategies. This needs to occur at the local level between districts and their schools, and at the provincial level between governments and local jurisdictions. This will be difficult because the forces of change are complex, and the strategies needed must constantly engage in a balancing act between too much and too little structure, between top-down desires and bottom-up inclinations.⁶ This is best done by deliberately formulating and trying out combined strategies, learning from them, and then refining and strengthening our overall capacity to mobilize local and state forces in concert. It is easy to get discouraged, but the next several years represent an ideal time to develop the kinds of sophisticated and powerful strategies needed for substantial educational reform at all levels.

1. Fullan, M., Galluzzo, G., Morris, P., Watson, N., *The Rise & Stall of Teacher Education Reform* (Washington, D.C.: AACTE, 1998)
2. *Ibid.*, , p. 58.
3. Micklethwait, J., Wooldridge, A., *The Witch Doctors: Making Sense of Management Gurus* (New York: Times Books, Random House, 1996) p. 294.
4. Hargreaves, A., & Fullan, M., *What's Worth Fighting for Out Here?* (Toronto: Ontario Public Teachers' Federation, 1998.)
5. *Ibid.* , p. 92
6. Fullan, M. (in press), *Change Forces: The Sequel* (London: Falmer Press)