System leadership, networks and the question of power
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What is This?
In the formation of leaders, one premise is fundamental: is it the intention that there should always be rulers and ruled, or is the objective to create the conditions in which this division is no longer necessary?

(Gramsci, 1971: 144)

In the last few years it has become increasingly evident that the ‘standards agenda’ has run out of steam: improvement in pupil performance has levelled off and the equality gap remains wide. Educationists who are most influential in government thinking – David Hopkins, David Hargreaves, Michael Fullan, Brian Caldwell, Christine Gilbert and the authors of a series of National College for School Leadership publications – share a common diagnosis of the problem. Hopkins (2007: 24) speaks of ‘the failure of performance based reform’.

Its centralised top-down prescriptive approach suppresses the expertise, creativity and innovation of practitioners which are necessary for continuing improvement. They are also in agreement about what the solution is. It should be schools, not government, leading change:

‘It may well be that the system is currently becoming immunized to ‘top-down’ and command and control change strategies.

(Hopkins, 2007: 5)

Caldwell (2006) insists that policy-makers must ‘empower the frontline’. Hopkins says that ‘There is a growing recognition that schools need to lead the next phase of reform’ (2007: 44). Whole system reform is needed:

. . . it requires a commitment to sustained, systemic change because a focus on individual school improvement always distorts social equity.

(Hopkins, 2007: 9)

That requires new agents – system leaders:

‘System leaders’ are those headteachers [...] who care about and work for the success of other schools as well as their own.

(Hopkins, 2007: 153)

And it requires new organisational forms – networks:

. . . in networking lies the basis for system transformation.

(Hopkins, 2007: 115)

What is system leadership?

According to Hopkins, it comprises a range of emerging roles including:

- leading an educational improvement partnership;
- executive headship, running two or more schools;
- leading in extremely challenging circumstances or becoming an academy principal;
- ‘Civic or Community leadership to broker and shape partnerships across local communities . . .’;
- change agent as NLE, SIP, consultant leaders.

(Hopkins, 2006)

What is being advocated here is the creation of a new professional identity, a new top-level management cadre in the school system. Caldwell (2006) speaks of ‘master strategists’ who are at Level 5 of the management hierarchy, ‘executive leadership’. However, Hopkins’
conception of system leadership has recently been criticised by Hargreaves (2007) on the grounds that it is concerned with operational rather than strategic leadership, with the implementation of government policy rather than its formulation.

System leadership is not leading just one or more schools, not even many schools, but leading the education system as a whole and doing so with an explicit moral purpose in mind, with the implications for action.

So the true meaning of system leadership?

System leadership arises when political leaders and school leaders openly debate and agree on the moral purpose of education, that is, the kind of people that education creates for what kind of society; and then work in partnership to agree and to implement both the means by which such purposes can be realised in practice and the criteria by which success in such an endeavour is to be judged.

(Hargreaves, 2007)

Hargreaves asks: ‘But will ministers and officials grant school leaders such a role?’ It is a question I will return to.

Networks: the organisational forms of system leadership

The principal organisational form which it is claimed is most appropriate for system leadership is the network. Though system leadership is at present largely an Anglophone discourse – perhaps because the top-down ‘standards’ agenda has been most advanced in those countries, especially England, and its limitations have become evident earlier than elsewhere – networks are a global discourse, much influenced by the work of Manuel Castells on the ‘network society’ – the claim that new networked forms of organisation are replacing vertically integrated hierarchies as the dominant form of social organisation – and promoted in education by international agencies such as the OECD (2003).

In school education in the UK, network forms range from formal governance structures – federations of schools – to structured partnerships – Networked Learning Communities, 14–19 partnerships – to more informal collaborations. Collaborations of various types are currently taking place at 16 ‘field trial’ sites, supported and monitored by the DfES Innovation Unit, which has been focusing since 2005 on ‘Next Practice’, in partnership with the National College for School Leadership (Hannon, 2007).

What is the function of networks?

Networks for collaboration among schools are not new, as Michael Fielding and his co-authors point out:

…many more experienced practitioners remarked that a range of collaborative work had been a relatively typical feature of their work prior to 1988. There was considerable criticism of the short ‘historical memory’ of policy makers in this respect.

(Fielding et al., 2005: 2)

Nor are networks new in the field of governance in education. Ranson and Tomlinson’s book School Co-operation: New Forms of Local Governance was published as long ago as 1994. What drives its rise to prominence in the dominant policy discourse today is the urgency of transforming schooling to meet its economic imperatives and the failure of the ‘standards agenda’ to provide a long-term policy settlement. Networks, it is claimed, offer a solution to the problem of ‘school improvement’ by facilitating knowledge and practice transfer.

In 2003, Hargreaves argued that individual and small-scale innovation is inadequate and large-scale mandated change is counter-productive.

Innovation has not disappeared from English schools over the last 20 years, but it has declined and has tended to go underground, surviving in spite of government policy rather than thriving because of it. Transformation means that such covert, personalised, microinnovation is no longer adequate to the task facing schools, which will now need to create and sustain an explicit climate of experimentation and planned innovation that characterises business firms, whose very survival depends on successful knowledge creation. For the centre cannot devise enough innovation across the whole range of teacher practices to implement the demanded rate of change. Moreover, the teaching profession will accept only a limited amount of prescription from the centre without loss of professional morale. If teachers are to take ownership of reform through innovation in their practices, they must play a part in their creation.

(Hargreaves, 2003: 34)

There is a general consensus around this view among those educationists who are close to government. In 2020 Vision Christine Gilbert and her co-authors speak of the need to overcome school autonomy through partnerships
and federations to enable ‘knowledge creation, capture and transfer’ and to create a ‘system for innovation in teaching and learning’ (Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group, 2006: 33). For Hopkins (2007):

The key purpose of networks is to create and disseminate knowledge to support educational improvement and innovation.

(p. 131)

Networks can provide a means of facilitating local innovation and change as well as contributing to large-scale reform. They offer the potential for ‘reinventing’ local support for schools by promoting different forms of collaboration, linkages and multifunctional partnerships.

(p. 132)

**Power within networks**

Hargreaves (2003), endorsed by Hopkins (2007: 116–18), explains that the task of leadership, both at school and at network levels, is to relate together three forms of capital: intellectual, social and organisational. It is of course to Bourdieu that we owe this way of thinking, but for Bourdieu capital, in its various economic and non-economic forms, is not just an asset, it is a contested relationship within a field of power.

Each network in education is a field in Bourdieu’s sense, linked to and overlapping with numerous other fields, and subject to the dominant field of power, politics at the state level. In that context, how does power work in these networks?

The first point to make is that the emerging network landscape which schools are finding themselves in is immensely complex. Increasingly schools are participants in a multiplicity of networks of different types and scales, geographical and issue-based, ranging in scale from the local area to authority-wide and national, with formally structured partnerships, some involving new forms of governance and less formal collaborations, and connecting the school to other public services and to the private and third sectors. While overall control at the national level remains with government, the decline of the power of local authorities means that there is no equivalent centralised power at the local level, no dominant centre of the emerging multiple and cross-cutting system of networks. This is a novel situation for school education which requires new theoretical perspectives to make complex patterns of power visible.

There are several recent forms of network organisation where the hierarchical power structure is overt. One is federations of schools under an executive head. Another is academies and trust schools where governance is in the hands of external sponsors. A third is academies and trusts comprising two or more schools with a common controlling sponsor. One of the functions of the discourse of system leadership is to provide a rationale for these new forms of governance. But the majority of networks do not involve new forms of governance. How is power distributed within them? What is the relation of the horizontal and the vertical?

The concept of network can carry a powerful and persuasive ideological charge for teachers alienated by top-down prescription. In contrast, networks seem to be based on horizontal not vertical relationships, to be democratic and participatory not hierarchical and bureaucratic.

This theme is developed by Hargreaves:

A key to transformation is for the teaching profession to establish innovation networks that capture the spirit and culture of internet hackers – the passion, the can-do, the collective sharing. Teachers could create an ‘innovation commons’ for education, in parallel to the digital commons of the open source movement, a common pool of resources to which innovators contribute and on which any school or teacher might draw to improve professional practice. This could be a professionally self-governing, decentralised means of supporting both front-line and transferred innovation that needs no central control.

(Hargreaves 2003: 56)

Hargreaves speaks of the power of self-organisation (p. 64) and the emergence of complex self-creating systems (p. 68). This is an attractive vision of open and horizontal relationships based on equitably distributed power. However, it sits alongside a very different theme in the same text which is based on a different theory of knowledge production. ‘Transformation does not require every school to become an innovative school’ (p. 28). Hargreaves envisages a hierarchical system of innovation in which a minority of schools would lead innovation and provide models of good practice which would be transferred to other schools.

Since highly innovative schools will be in a minority, transformation depends crucially on the capacity of the system to manage transferred innovation. This will be best achieved where schools are bound into close collaborative relationships with one another or, as we shall see, embedded in networks,
especially groups of schools that are beginning to develop federations or collegiates.

(Hargreaves, 2003: 40)

Transferring innovations and best practices through networks

Effective champions are practitioners who are well connected to other practitioners and have the skills to ‘sell’ a good practice and offer practical support to peers who are willing to adopt it, but need help to do so. Champions should therefore be sought in leading-edge schools, where they are most likely to be embedded in structures that aid dissemination.

(Hargreaves, 2003: 51)

A very different perspective is offered by the authors of the empirically based study of Factors Influencing the Transfer of Good Practice (Fielding et al., 2005). First, they note that labelling schools in a hierarchy can have negative effects.

But it is also possible to argue that the consequence of ‘badging’ schools (e.g. as Beacon, successful, failing, and so on) and articulating a particular perspective in ways that present starkly contrasting notions of public worth (e.g. ‘The best leading the rest’) within the wider framework of a competitive education market place is highly significant.

(Fielding et al., 2005: 17)

Second, they reject one-way ‘donor-recipient’ models of transfer of practice in favour of the concept of two-way ‘joint practice development’.

A ‘transfer’ model seems to be associated with delivery of ‘validated’ packages of pre-formed practice seen by others to be good for the recipient. We suggest ‘joint practice development’ which explicitly articulates a more learner-centred approach and provides a better description both of what teachers aspired to and what they actually achieved together. This change in terminology validates the existing practice of teachers who are trying to learn new ways of working and acknowledges the effort of those who are trying to support them. It also underscores the necessity of mutual engagement which lies at the heart of the complex task of opening up and sharing practices with others.

(p. 72)

He suggests that hierarchical networks are founded on a philosophical background of technical rationality and offers three assumptions entwined with this approach (based on Schön, 1983): first, there are general solutions to practical problems; second, these solutions can be developed outside practical situations; and third, the solutions can be transferred into practitioners’ actions and solve practical problems. For Posch,

‘Consequences of these assumptions are the separation of theory and practice, of knowledge and action, of means and ends, and the emergence of two hierarchies: the hierarchy of knowledge and the hierarchy of credibility’. (p. 65)

He adds that the hierarchy of knowledge is manifest in a research-development-dissemination model of innovation. The typical ways in which such innovations reach practitioners are information leaflets, training courses, administrative incentives and pressures. Through these tools a hierarchical network serves to bring about efficient implementation of knowledge and regulations, and to facilitate and control their use by teachers.

Dynamic networks are suggested as an alternative model, and Posch uses four characteristics to define their difference from hierarchical networks.

1. The connections between participants/elements in a network are symmetric – on a horizontal level rather than in a vertical hierarchy. Any participant/element are sources of messages and a variety of messages are transported. The total advantage of exchanges is distributed evenly among the participants/elements. The symmetric relationship makes exchange processes, understandings of each other and meta-reflection on the network’s development possible.

2. The connections between participants/elements are characterised by exchange processes (e.g. comparing, influencing, learning). They are not pre-specified routes and their duration can vary.

3. The connections are not safeguarded by pre-defined rules but are defined and charged by shared interests. There is always possibility for more connections, ways of working and content to be added. Relationships can develop quite spontaneously, so not necessarily through formal negotiation.

4. Networks can perform multiple functions and any one connection activity can support (or hinder) multiple messages. They are...
multi-dimensional. As a result there is open access to potentially unlimited learning processes. In contrast to hierarchical systems, new connections can be formed without having to give up the existing ones. (Adapted from Fischer-Kowalski 1991.)

(Fielding et al., 2005: 93–4)

**Power and networks**

Bourdieu asserts that power within fields is ultimately derived from the overarching field of political power. To understand networks in that context I want to draw on wider theoretical work on networks, because of course they are not unique to education: on the contrary, the network paradigm is a key theme in state governance theory.

Bob Jessop, in his book *The Future of the Capitalist State* (Jessop, 2002) notes the rise of ‘heterarchy’ – horizontal self-organisation among mutually interdependent actors as a form of governance. He explains this development as the result of a recognition of the limits both of state command action and of market competition.

It implies that there are important new problems which have emerged that cannot be managed or resolved readily, if at all, through top-down state planning or market-mediated anarchy. This has promoted a shift in the institutional centre of gravity (or institutional attractor) around which policymakers choose among possible modes of coordination.

(p. 229)

In other words, heterarchy is a form of state management and control:

. . . the state’s increasing interest in heterarchy’s potential for enhancing its capacity to secure political objectives by sharing power with forces beyond it and/or delegating responsibilities for specific objectives to partnerships (or other heterarchic arrangements).

(p. 237)

The network paradigm doesn’t replace either state direction or the market – it provides the state with one management tool among others. In the context of public administration Klijn and Skelcher deploy the concept of governance networks.

Governance networks are associated with new systems for public policy deliberation, decision and implementation [. . .]. They are based on interdependencies, but not necessarily equity, between public, private and civil society actors. [. . .] Governance networks are often associated with new hybrid organizational forms that play a major role in shaping and delivering public policy to citizens and communities . . .

(Klijn and Skelcher, 2007: 587–8)

As against the pluralist view that governance networks enhance participatory democracy, ‘The contrasting view is that networks are centres of power and privilege [. . .] This critique of the pluralist position emphasizes the strong managerial character of governance networks . . .’ (p. 588). Networks in the dominant education policy discourse can be best understood as forms of governance networks: their potential for horizontal relationships is over-determined by vertical relations of hierarchy driven by government agendas.

**The role of system leaders**

It is in the context of networks as an apparatus of management and control that we need to see the role of system leaders. Networks have to be managed to ensure that they align with government agendas, and system leaders are required in order to carry out that function. The principal task of networks is the creation and dissemination of knowledge and practice, but that cannot be entrusted to teachers in self-organised peer-to-peer networks because only certain forms of knowledge and practice conform to government agendas. The role of system leaders is to manage that selection and implementation process. According to Fullan (2005: 84), networks are good at sharing ideas and capacity building, but they are not ‘coherence-makers’, so the task of system leaders is to select what he calls the ‘quality knowledge’. Nor do networks have the ‘line-authority’ – i.e. the positional power – for ‘sustained implementation’.

The dominant discourse of system leadership represents a technocratic managerial solution based on a claimed expertise in the management and leadership of change. According to Fullan (2003):

. . . the principal is the only role strategically placed to mediate the tensions of local and state forces in a way that gets problems solved.

(p. 22)

One fundamental problem system leaders have to deal with is the management of alternative views. Networks are seldom consensual bodies (Frankham, 2006) and, as Newman says:
Labour’s discourse can be appropriated for alternative agendas – counter-discourse spaces. Networks opened up new subject positions.

(2001: 167)

Dissent therefore has to be managed and opposition delegitimised. Thus Fullan (2005: 100) recognises that leading change provokes ‘regressive resistance’, but he poses it in terms of having ‘disturbed the personal and institutional equilibrium’, with no recognition that dissidents might have legitimate different values and aims.

A particular challenge to the technocratic mission can come from forms of elected local democracy – school governing bodies and local authorities – so it is not surprising that some leading advocates of system leadership want to weaken their power. Hopkins claims that ‘Moral purpose in school reform [...] is also about empowering communities’ (2007: 179), and the NCSL publication Creating Community Links (National College for School Leadership, n.d.) speaks of schools as agencies for democracy, of making schools more accountable and increasing democratic involvement so that local people can have more of a say in important decisions about their schools, but the reforms Hopkins advocates would remove even those limited means of local popular influence which exist. He is insistent that schools should be free from one of the few means by which communities can exercise some power over local school systems, through schools’ accountability to local elected government:

... the move towards networking should be developed and groups of secondary schools must, in particular, be encouraged to form collaborative arrangements outside local control.

(Hopkins, 2007: 172)

Caldwell goes further in questioning whether there is a need at all for local authorities in education, envisaging just autonomous schools operating within a government framework of standards, resources and accountability. Hargreaves takes a different view, seeing a role for local authorities as brokers – though not drivers:

The LEA’s role in transformation is as a hub in the network of schools in which they become a broker for networks and the disciplined innovation and knowledge transfer that needs to be coordinated within them.

(2003: 70)

As for school governing bodies, in a series of seminars with Hopkins, system leaders recommended ‘gaining specific powers to succeed in the face of resistance from (partner) school governors’ (Hopkins, 2007: 165). Federations strengthen the power of executive heads at the expense of individual school governing bodies, Academies reduce the number of elected parent governors from one-third of the governing body to one, and the strategic decision-making of chains of academies and trust schools takes place within their sponsors’ organisations rather than at school level.

The displacement of forms of local democracy by unelected and managed networks has to be accompanied by the construction of new network forms at the national level if Hargreaves’ vision of system leaders as the privileged strategic interlocutors of government is to be realised. A prime example is the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) a powerful quasi-state body which has established its own network infrastructure in the form of regional coordinators, subject leaders, expert panels, lead practitioners, lead learners (as developed in the maths team) and so on.

(Hargreaves, 2004: 11)

David Hargreaves and Brian Caldwell are Associate Directors of the SSAT, and it sponsors David Hopkins’ professorial chair.

Conclusion

Let me end by briefly summarising the argument I have tried to develop. It revolves around the relationships between government agendas and the agency of teachers, and between them the intermediary role of management as ‘system leaders’ of network forms. (There is a parallel with the function of distributed leadership at school level: see Hatcher, 2005.) Network is a pluralistic concept: networks can serve very different educational-political interests. They offer the potential of new participatory relationships among teachers across schools, but also the potential of simply being vehicles for the transmission and implementation of government agendas. The role of system leaders is clearly pivotal, but again it is ambivalent. Will they be rooted in and primarily responsible to grassroots initiatives or will their role be to manage them on behalf of government, creating themselves in the process as a new super-managerial elite?

Are we witnessing the emergence of a new and complex multiple network landscape which
is more participatory, more democratic, more ‘dynamic’, or one which is hierarchical and controlled by a technocratic managerial elite even more remote from the influence of representative democracy?

My own view is that networks and system leadership can best be understood as a reconfiguring of state power, attempting to create new vehicles for the implementation of policy under the control of a reliable new technocratic management cadre. As for what it will mean in practice: whether the project of creating sufficient system leaders succeeds, and the extent to which network forms are capable of resolving the crisis of ‘performativity’, remains to be seen. Within each network the tensions and contradictions I have described will no doubt work themselves out in different ways and, perhaps, with different outcomes.

Note
An earlier version of this article was given as a paper at the BELMAS seminar ‘Unpacking Educational Leadership – Staring Complexity in the Face’, at Liverpool John Moores University, 3 July 2007.

References


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