Networks as a force for change

Connecting central policy and learning networks

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There are inevitable tensions between the idea of learning networks, which are based on ideas of capacity building as a key to reform, and a strong recent history, in Britain and elsewhere, of education reform through central policy mandate, which remains the dominant order of the day in education.

By and large, mandated reforms have not worked very well (Hopkins & Levin, 2000; Levin, 2001; Levin, 2004). They are often poorly designed and badly implemented, too inflexible to meet varying local conditions, inadequately resourced, create opposition on the part of teachers, are modified to suit varying political pressures in ways that work against their purposes, and often abandoned before they have a chance to bear fruit.

These problems are not simply due to incompetence or so-called 'political' considerations. Rather, they reflect enduring realities of government, including the need to please or placate diverse and conflicting views, lack of public understanding of the complexities of education policy, having to deal with too many issues for the available time, and the demands of electoral politics (Levin, 2002, in press). These problems cannot readily be overcome through better intentions.

Central policy mandates can, if well done, have some strengths. They can provide a common sense of direction, focus resources – whether new or reallocated – on key tasks and provide a basis on which effective networks can be built.

Learning networks are in large measure the mirror image of central policies. The strengths of networks lie in respect for local context and practitioner knowledge and in their focus on building engagement and capacity among participants. The potential weaknesses of learning networks are also largely the obverse of those of central policy approaches. Learning networks can lack focus and can become self-indulgent. They can celebrate practitioner knowledge or local context to the point where difficult questions do not get raised and feeling good about one's current state becomes more important than looking carefully and objectively at student success and how it might be improved.

These differences suggest that advocates of central policy are likely to be uncomfortable with learning networks because the latter have the potential to undermine the former, whereas proponents of learning networks may actively dislike central policy approaches because they violate most of their deepest beliefs about how effective schools can be fostered. A substantial amount of the literature on education reform mirrors these different views and can result easily in a dialogue of the deaf between people whose basic assumptions are highly divergent. The danger is that the two streams may carry on in mutual suspicion if not active hostility, with the result that neither will be as effective as it might.

Central policy and learning networks could actually complement each other by bringing together different and equally necessary strengths while curbing each other's excesses.

For leaders of learning networks, two strategies are critical: to ensure that networks give significant and meaningful attention to the key objectives of central policies; and to guard against the tendency towards whining or self-congratulation rather than hard action. Two key elements will be for learning networks to demonstrate publicly that their work is connected to key priorities and to produce some evidence of outcomes. Networks should have flexibility as to which central priorities they take up and how they address them, but it should not be difficult for each learning network to provide some evidence as to how its work does connect to improved learning, greater inclusion, reduced gaps, stronger ties with parents and families, and so on. Learning networks need to give serious attention to what sorts of outcomes they could demonstrate that would provide some confidence in the efficacy of their work (Leithwood & Levin, 2004). Although each learning network is, appropriately, different in its approach and interests, there would have to be some commonality in measures across networks to demonstrate their impact. Participant satisfaction is not a sufficient demonstration of impact.

The second need is to ensure that learning networks are sufficiently 'hard-nosed' in their work. Learning networks need to put themselves deliberately into contact – perhaps as 'critical friends' – with people who do not necessarily share their assumptions and goals. Efforts should be made specifically to build ongoing relationships between learning networks and key central policy managers such as regional directors of the various DfES strategies. Commitment to the evaluation of activities and outcomes will also tend to focus attention on whether activities are actually making a meaningful difference.

For central policy managers, two strategies are also important: to work with learning networks as a way of generating local capacity and commitment to educational improvement; and to provide a sufficient degree of local autonomy and flexibility in policy implementation to allow learning networks to become important allies on key priorities. It cannot be expected that learning networks will necessarily embrace central policy goals or approaches in their entirety. Learning networks need to be able to be critical of central policy directions in specific areas. Still, it would be highly desirable to find ways in which learning networks could be part of larger strategies – for example as sounding boards to test the impact and efficacy of various strategic initiatives or as partners in professional development related to key initiatives.

Policies that are strong on goals and flexible on means sound good but are often hard to do. Central policy managers tend to be confident that they know what is needed and suspicious that local people will subvert their efforts, so there is often unwillingness to give much ground on policy directions. Also, large organisations such as governments tend to bureaucratise their work so that compliance with procedures becomes more important than achievement of goals. Learning networks might play a useful role here precisely by reflecting back areas where policy is and is not working well.

Finally, it is important that advocates of both approaches should see the potential that learning networks provide to learn more about how local autonomy and capacity can work with central policy to improve teaching and learning practices in schools.

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