Connecting Central Policy and Networked Learning Communities

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A paper prepared for the evaluation of the NCSL Networked Learning Communities Strategy

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Abstract

Networked Learning Communities (NLCs) are an interesting and unusual education reform strategy in that they are based on ideas of capacity-building as a key to reform. The idea of NLCs, however, sits uneasily alongside a strong recent history, in Britain and elsewhere, of education reform through central policy mandates. This paper looks at the strengths and weaknesses of central policy reform and of networked learning communities, suggesting some tensions between the two approaches and proposing some ways in which the two approaches might go beyond peaceful co-existence to a productive synergy.

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Introduction

Networked Learning Communities (NLCs) are an interesting and unusual education reform strategy. Drawing from ideas of capacity-building as a key to reform, they focus on strengthening the ability of schools to improve by creating dialogue and connections among school leaders on matters of common interest. The idea of NLCs, however, sits uneasily alongside a strong recent history, in Britain and elsewhere, of education reform through top-down central policy mandates.

In this paper I consider the strengths and weaknesses of central policy reform and of networked learning communities. There are inevitable tensions between the two approaches due to their very different assumptions about change. I suggest steps that might be taken to allow co-existence and even some ways in which the two approaches could move from peaceful co-existence to a productive synergy. The paper is rooted in my understanding of the political and education reform context in England based on work I have done there over the last 5 to 8 years, including a study of education reform in the 1980s and early 1990s (Levin, 2001), participation in an evaluation of the implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (Earl et al., 2003), a background paper for NCSL on evaluating their impact (Levin, 2003), and a paper for an ESRC study of managing large-scale reform in the public sector (Levin, 2004). It also draws on my experience as a senior government manager for education in Canada.

Characteristics of central policy vs networked learning communities

Despite a stress in the literature on education reform on issues of capacity and implementation, there can be no doubt that central policy mandates remain the dominant order of the day in education. Governments everywhere are investing heavily in policy pronouncements that, they believe, will improve educational outcomes through 'dictat'. The Conservative government in Britain in the 1980s created a whole series of reforms around the general slogan of 'diversity and choice'. These have been followed under Labour by a host of new programs and policies ranging from Education Action Zones (EAZ) to Excellence In Cities (EIC) to Specialist Schools to Fresh Start to the National

Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, and many more. In the United States we now have No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a massive top-down reform based substantially on the idea that schools will only improve if forced to do so by external pressure. Most U S states have also had large-scale education reform programs over the years; in some states several different reforms have followed each other rapidly within a few years. Canadian provinces have followed suit with an array of mandated reforms in curriculum, testing, teacher education and certification, governance and finance. Australian states have also implemented a range of reforms in these areas.

The limitations of these mandated reforms are well known; by and large they have not worked well (Hopkins & Levin, 2000; Levin, 2001; Levin, 2004). To put their deficiencies briefly and bluntly, they are often poorly designed and badly implemented, too inflexible to meet varying local conditions, inadequately resourced, create opposition on the part of teachers, modified to suit varying political pressures in ways that work against their purposes, and often abandoned before they have a chance to bear fruit. No wonder people in schools are skeptical about mandated reforms. They have simply seen too many of them with too little commitment and not much impact.

These problems are not simply due to incompetence or so-called 'political' considerations, either. 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, in other words, cannot readily be overcome through better intentions.

On the other hand, central policy mandates are not inherently wrong and can, if well done, have some strenghts. In particular, they can provide a common sense of direction, focus resources on key tasks, and provide a basis on which effective networks can be built. In terms of direction, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in England (Earl et al., 2003) provide a good example of a reform that created enormous focus on literacy and numeracy in primary schools across England. (I am not dealing here with the value or effectiveness of this emphasis, but only saying that it was a result of the Strategies.) Similarly, NCLB in the United States has drawn a great amount of attention to issues of academic progress for minority and ethnic groups including students

with special needs. (Again, I am not commenting here on the policy's appropriateness.) Given the many competing demands that schools face every day, including everything from academic work to character building to pro-social behaviour to physical fitness, a certain degree of common focus on a smaller number of goals can be a salutary development.

Central policy can also focus resources on key priorities. The NLS and NNS brought millions of pounds annually in new funds from the government in support of literacy and numeracy, including high quality materials for teachers, extensive professional development and even some support for family literacy. Extra resources do not always accompany reforms; governments are always under pressure to do more with less, so it is not uncommon for reforms to be underfunded. However even where new funds are limited, existing resources, including staff positions, professional development, materials, and, most importantly, time and attention, are shifted from other tasks towards central policy requirements. Of course this comes at a cost, but it does focus resources in critical areas.

Precisely because of the focus of attention and resources, central policy mandates also provide strong grounds for building local networks, a point that will be explored further a little later.

The strengths and limitations of Networked Learning Communities are in large measure mirror image of those of central policies. Networked Learning Communities have their strength in their respect for local context and practitioner knowledge and in their focus on building engagement and capacity among participants. Because these characteristics are laid out in various NLC documents and will presumably be considered more fully in other papers at this meeting, I will not say much about them except once again to emphasize how different they are from central policy processes.

In the same way, the potential weaknesses of NLCs are largely the obverse of those of central policy approaches. NLCs can lack focus and can become self-indulgent. Participants may have a tendency to swap war stories and talk about how difficult things are for them as a result of the actions of others. Networks 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 may be improved.

Table 1 draws the contrasts and tensions between central policy and NLCs sharply – more sharply than is likely to be the case in reality most of the time.

Table 1 – Characteristics of NLCs and CP

	Networked Communities	Central Policy
Ownership	Participants	Central authorities
Vision	Diverse in light of diverse participants and settings	Common vision and focus for all
Strategy	Do what makes sense in your setting	Common approach in all settings
Knowledge	From the inside	From the outside

Tensions between central policy and networked communities

These differences suggest that advocates of central policy are likely to be uncomfortable with NLCs because the latter have the potential to undermine the former. Similarly, proponents of NLCs may actively dislike CP approaches because these approaches 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 in Britain, where both approaches are very active, 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. This danger is exacerbated because there has been so much change over the last 20 years and so much unhappiness among educators about much of that change. The 'sides' as it were, are firmly entrenched, with advocates of central policy convinced that they are on track to fundamental improvement of the system and their opponents feeling that a huge effort has been demanded of them to very little benefit. The fact that many of these central policy proposals and the arguments around them have had a high public and political profile renders the likelihood of conflict even greater. Once a government commits to a course of action it is hard to backtrack. Ministerial and political staff will go a long way to defend their minister's or

government's reputation. The very heated nature of the public and political debate over education in Britain means that the stakes are high. If NLCs cannot deliver some kind of visible and evident benefit there is, I believe, a substantial chance that they will be downgraded or cancelled altogether.

Yet I will argue in the rest of this paper that central policy and networked learning communities could actually complement each other by bringing together different and equally necessary strengths while curbing each other's excesses. Further, the need to reconcile central policy and learning communities encapsulates a larger central issue in education reform generally – how to combine a strong sense of common direction and priority with strategies that can bring about the local commitment and action that is necessary for real and lasting educational change. If some modus vivendi can be found in the English context, the approach might well be applicable in other settings.

Bringing CP and NLC together

How might such a rapprochement take place? There are some basic strategies and some specific steps that can and should be taken by leaders of both approaches. Further actions should be taken to build bridges between the two ways of thinking.

For leaders of NLCs, 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 in participant-driven networks towards either whining or self-congratulation rather than hard action.

For central policy managers two strategies are also important – to work with NLCs 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 NLCs to become important allies on key priorities.

Let's explore these ideas a little more fully. First, it is vital for their future that NLCs be seen as contributing to the central goals of government in some way. This is rather tricky, even though NLC documents list improving student learning as a first goal or priority. NLCs cannot be seen as instruments of central policy. Nor can they be expected to pursue only activities prescribed by central authorities, as this would vitiate their central raison d'etre. In fact, Networks need to be free to be critical of aspects of

central policy when that is the view of their participants. Too much emphasis on central policy could be deadly to the participant driven approach that the NLCs are intended to embody.

The task for the NCL leadership is to find ways to ensure that all the communities do give a reasonable amount of attention to key policy priorities of government without losing their locally driven sense of purpose. There are several ways this could be done, but two key elements will be for NLCs to demonstrate publicly that their work is connected to key priorities and to produce some evidence of outcomes.

The first of these is clearly easier than the second. 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 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. There are many ways in which networks could attend to larger policy goals without abandoning their own interests. In fact, it is hard to imagine a Network that would not be engaged with at least some main priorities as part of its work.

Evidence of outcomes is a much more difficult proposition. In work done earlier for NCSL (Levin, 2003) I suggested that linking leadership directly to student outcomes was unlikely to be a satisfactory approach, but that one could link to intermediate variables – activities that can themselves plausibly be connected to improved learning. For example, an effective NLC might reasonably be expected to show, over time, evidence of improved teacher, student and parent morale and motivation in participating schools, which can reasonably be associated in turn with improved outcomes. The matter is not a simple one, but NLCs have 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). Moreover, although each Network is, appropriately, different in its approach and interests, there would have to be some commonality in measures across networks to demonstrate their impact.

Evidence of participant satisfaction cannot itself be a satisfying or sufficient demonstration of impact. A large literature on assessing the outcomes of training shows clearly that participant satisfaction may be entirely unrelated to subsequent change in practice or behaviour (Hesketh, 1997, Collins, 2002).

The second need is to ensure that NLCs are sufficiently 'hard-nosed' in their work. Several possibilities exist here as well. One strategy is to ensure that each Network involves some 'critical friends' from outside, including some with strong commitments to central policy goals. It will be particularly important for Networks to put themselves deliberately into contact with people who do not necessarily share their assumptions and goals. NLCs might be asked to adopt something like the concept of 'heretic lunches', in which an organization regularly challenges its own thinking by bringing to the table people who do not share its predispositions. Efforts should be made specifically to build ongoing relationships between the Networks and key central policy managers such as regional directors of the various DfES strategies. Commitment to evaluation of activities and outcomes will also tend to focus attention on whether activities are actually making a meaningful difference.

For advocates of central policy directions, one key need is to find ways to engage the NLCs is some of their work. This will not be simple in that it cannot be expected that NLCs will necessarily embrace central policy goals or approaches in their entirety. As mentioned, NLCs 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 NLCs could be part of larger strategies. For example NLCs might be used as sounding boards to test the impact and efficacy of various strategic initiatives. NLCs could be asked to participate in, say, the organization of professional development related to key initiatives. Regional directors for various DfES initiatives might make efforts to work with NLCs as they develop their strategies.

The second requirement is to allow enough latitude in central policies so that they can in fact be taken up by Networks in differing ways. In theory it ought to be simple to establish policies that are strong on goals and flexible on means, but in practice there are two problems in doing so. First, central policy directors, whether at the bureaucratic or political level, tend to be sure 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 dictates. Second, large organizations such as governments inevitably tend to bureaucratize their work so that compliance with procedures becomes more important than achievement of goals. This is a challenge for all central policy managers; the NLCs

might play a useful role here precisely by reflecting back areas where policy is and is not working well.

Clearly these strategies are mutually reinforcing. To the degree that NLCs take up some of the key concerns of government in meaningful ways, suspicion about their nature and purpose is likely to decrease. To the degree that central policies make use of the strengths of Networks and have more flexibility and local option built into them, members of NLCs will be less likely to criticize them.

These synergies could be reinforced by some further steps that build bridges between advocates of the different approaches. A couple of ideas along these lines have already been suggested, such as creating connections between regional directors of government strategies and local NLCs. Whenever possible efforts should be made to bring together NLC participants and central policy advocates and managers in settings that allow an open exchange of views. The more understanding that can be built, the less likely it is that each party will dismiss the work of the other.

Another learning experience

Finally, it is important that advocates of both approaches should, as suggested by the activity of which this paper forms a part, see the potential that the NLC experiment provides to learn more about how local autonomy and capacity can work with central policy to improve teaching and learning practices in schools. The DfES has shown an unusual and commendable willingness to undertake fair and open evaluation of its policies and to change its practice based on those evaluations. NLCs present another opportunity to learn from a unique initiative. For the evaluation to be a true learning experience, all parties may have to be willing to suspend some of their assumptions pending the evidence. However an honest attempt to assess the impact of Networked Learning Communities is critical to assuring the Networks a secure place in the English education policy environment, and may be equally critical to building the capacity to make central policies meaningful and successful.

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