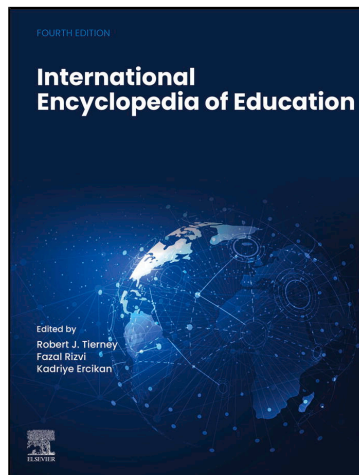


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## System leadership – emergence and maturity

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### Introduction

The concept of ‘system leadership’ is one that over the past two decades has caught the educational imagination. System leaders are those Heads or Principals who are willing to shoulder system wide roles in order to support the improvement of other schools as well as their own. As such, system leadership is a new and emerging practice that embraces a variety of responsibilities that are developing either locally or within discrete Local/State/Regional networks or policy driven initiatives that when taken together have the potential to contribute to system transformation.

The educational policy direction in many developed countries is changing quite dramatically at the present time (Harris and Jones, 2017; Hopkins, 2013; Schleicher, 2018) There is currently a rapid shift away from the government managed educational changes of the 1990s and 2000s to far more decentralised systems based on the principle of ‘autonomy’. This reflects the genuine belief on the part of many politicians and policy makers that there is a need to unleash the power of the profession that has been harnessed in the recent past by too much control. It is within such a context that system leadership assumes increasing importance.

The education leadership field is subject to fads and fashions that quickly come and swiftly go. In sharp contrast, the leadership models that have a sound and extensive empirical base tend to converge around a few core leadership areas (Leithwood et al., 2019). A systematic review of the evidence conducted by Gumus et al. (2018) concluded that distributed leadership, instructional leadership, teacher leadership and transformational leadership continue to be the most researched models of leadership. The review also found that empirical interest in all these leadership models has increased significantly over the past decade further strengthening the collective evidence base.

While system leadership does not feature in the current list of most researched models of leadership, it certainly remains a very popular idea and is still reflected in the policy landscape of many countries. Its presence is still evident in much of the contemporary writing about educational and organisational change.

Since its emergence in the early 2000s, system leadership was viewed as an important system driver and as a means of building the system capacity required for positive change. In 2008, the OECD undertook a significant research program and produced two volumes about system leadership, one of these volumes included a range of detailed country cases (Pont et al., 2008a, 2008b). At this time, prominent academics and influential policy makers endorsed the idea by writing about the processes, practices, and impact of system leadership in action (e.g. Fullan, 2005; Higham et al., 2009; Hopkins, 2009). The term ‘system leadership’ also links to earlier work on systems thinking and has strong connections with systems theory (Senge, 1990).

This chapter outlines the development of the concept of System Leadership and reviews the current international evidence base. In making the case for the potential of system leadership as the key driver for systemic reform the argument in this paper is divided into three key sections:

- **Part 1** outlines the genesis of System leadership pre-2010, in particular:
  - Explores emerging definitions of system leadership
  - Conceptualises its contribution to systemic reform
  - Describes its emergence in a case study of England
  - Reviews its emerging practice by referring to the 2008 OECD School Leadership study.
- **Part 2** reviews the literature post 2010 as the concept of system achieves maturity and is better embedded in policy reforms in many countries
- **Part 3** identifies future challenges.

## Part one

### Defining system leadership

System leadership, in the sense it is used in this chapter, implies a significantly more substantive engagement with other schools in order to bring about system transformation. Specifically, we define it as a form of leadership where a head teacher or principal is willing and able to shoulder wider system roles and in so doing is almost as concerned with the success and attainment of students in other schools as they are with their own.

Although the concept of 'system leadership' began to catch the educational imagination in the early 2000s it was not initially defined with such clarity. At this time, it was seen more as an emerging role, an instinct or aspiration rather than an operational job description. Take for example these quotations from two significant opinion makers. The first from the General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders in England and the other from a leading educational commentator whose work has a global reach.

[John Dunford \(2005\)](#) in an address to the National Conference of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) argued that:

The greatest challenge on our leadership journey is how we can bring about system improvement. How can we contribute to the raising of standards, not only in our own school, but in others and colleges too? What types of leaders are needed for this task? What style of leadership is required if we are to achieve the sea-change in performance that is demanded of us?

In *Systems Thinkers in Action* [Michael Fullan \(2004\)](#) argued that:

a new kind of leadership is necessary to break through the status quo. Systematic forces, sometimes called inertia, have the upper hand in preventing system shifts. Therefore, it will take powerful, proactive forces to change the existing system (to change context). This can be done directly and indirectly through systems thinking in action. These new theoreticians are leaders who work intensely in their own schools, or national agencies, and at the same time connect with and participate in the bigger picture. To change organizations and systems will require leaders to get experience in linking other parts of the system. These leaders in turn must help develop other leaders within similar characteristics.

These two quotes reflect the more tentative and emerging concept of the role in the early 2000s. The Dunford quote asks about future styles of leadership without proposing any answer to the question. The Fullan quote mentions the importance of leaders engaging in systems thinking but does not allude to the concept of system leaders developed in this chapter.

These quotations do however contain three implicit and important assumptions relevant to the emerging concept of system leadership. The first is that if we are ever to achieve sustainable education change it must be led by those close to the school [this is an explicit claim made by Fullan] the second is that this must have a systemic focus [also an explicit claim by Fullan]; the third is that "system leadership" is an emerging practice [that reflects the challenge implied by Dunford's questions].

Despite this tentativeness, system leadership as a concept has a rich theoretical and research context. The conceptual concerns of system theory for relationships, structures and interdependencies ([Katz and Kahn, 1966](#); [Senge, 1990](#); [Campbell et al., 1994](#)) underpin the contemporary work of system leaders in practice. The key insight here has been well summarised by [Kofman and Senge \(1995:27\)](#) when they state that the "... defining characteristic of a system is that it cannot be understood as a function of its isolated components. ... the system doesn't depend on what each part is doing but on how each part is interacting with the rest".

These demands are further illuminated in theory by [Peter Senge \(1990\)](#), who argues that for organisations to excel, they have to become "learning organisations", which he defines as "organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together" (p. 3). To Senge, the key to becoming a learning organisation is for leaders

to tap into people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels, to clarify broader systemic interdependencies and how to make them more effective (ibid, p. 4).

This theme, as seen in the quote above, underpins Fullan's (2005) exposition, in a later publication than the previous quote, of the role he believes school leaders will need to play as "system thinkers in action" if sustainable large-scale reform is to be achieved. This, Fullan argues, will necessarily involve adaptive challenges that "require the deep participation of the people with the problem; [and] that is why it is more complex and why it requires more sophisticated leadership" (p. 53). For Fullan, examples of this new work include:

- Leading and facilitating a revolution in pedagogy (p. 57)
- Understanding and changing the culture of a school for the better (p. 57)
- Relating to the broader community, in particular with parents, and integrating and co-ordinating the work of social service agencies into the school as a hub (p. 61)
- This will demand "... above all ... powerful strategies that enable people to question and alter certain values and beliefs as they create new forms of learning within and between schools, and across levels of the system" (ibid, p. 60).

The challenges that Fullan posits represent an ambitious agenda and, as will be seen later, not all "system leaders" take on all these roles. This list also begs the question - Are there enough Heads or Principals with the existing or potential dispositions and capacities, required to achieve such an ambitious set of expectations to lead the huge numbers of existing schools? This is not only an adaptive challenge, but also a logistical one. Our response, as is seen in Part Two of this chapter, is that there is no expectation that every Head or Principal will be a system leader, that would be both unrealistic and unnecessary. What however is both realistic and necessary is that a significant minority of such leaders adopt elements of this role if we are to move toward system transformation.

So, this discussion of system leadership is leading us to three initial conclusions. First the concept of system leadership flows from the general literature on systems theory and thinking. Second system leadership is a theory of action that embraces a range of disciplines in order to exert its power (see for example Elmore, 2004; Leithwood and Riehl, 2005). And third, system leadership will only exert any influence to the extent that it focuses on teaching and learning (i.e. is instructional), shares its authority with others (i.e. is distributed).

These assumptions lead to three other observations that are discussed in detail in this chapter. The first is that there is a tension between system leadership being a national policy or a professional movement. This dichotomy as we will see has profound implications for the prospect of sustainable educational reform. The second is that although system leadership is emerging as a professional practice, it is a concept that as we have seen is located in a rich theoretical and research context. The third observation is that while many school leaders in most jurisdictions are involved in some form of collaborative activity or networking, this is categorically not the same as system leadership. We continue to explore these observations in the following sections of the chapter.

### System leadership for system transformation

As has been noted already, the concept of system leadership emerged in the early 2000s, at a time when the long-term utility of large-scale top-down change was being questioned (Fullan, 2011; Hopkins, 2007; Sahlberg, 2012).

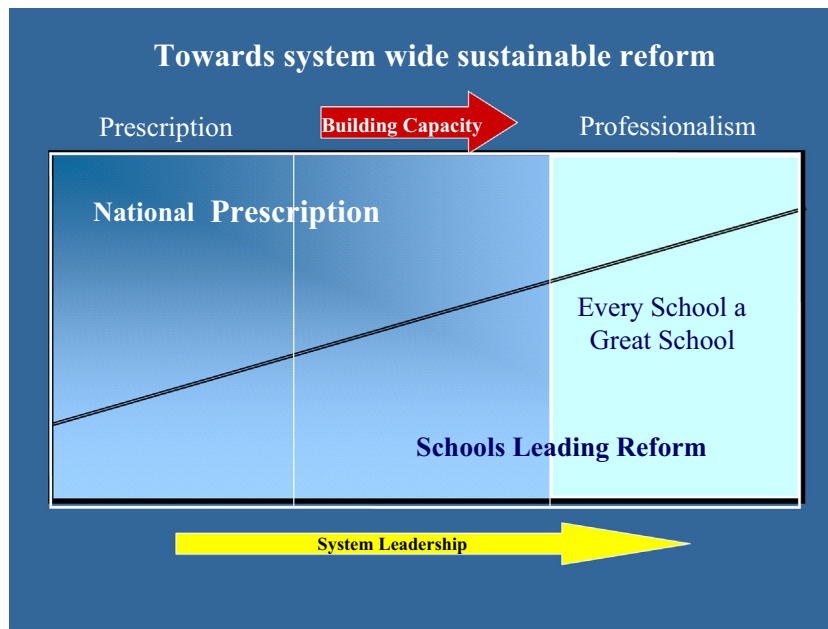
There is a general lesson to be drawn for large scale/systemic reform from the global experience in the early 2000s. It is that top-down large-scale reform which has an early narrow focus on key measurable skills can produce a rapid increase in standards at least initially. However, this initial rise in standards will inevitably level off over time if top-down micro-management becomes the default change strategy.

To move beyond this inevitable plateau of achievement requires a system wide school improvement approach that can deliver continuous improvement beyond the early gains. In other words, large scale reform has characteristically focused on short term objectives, whereas systemic change envisages a multi phased process that ensures that early gains do not level off but continue to improve as a consequence of employing strategies that at the same time raise achievement and build capacity.

However, achieving this shift is not straight forward. As Michael Fullan (2003:7) has said, it takes capacity to build capacity, and if there is insufficient capacity to begin with it is folly to announce that a move to 'professionalism' provides the basis of a new approach. The key question is 'how do we get there?', because we cannot simply move from one era to the other without self-consciously building professional capacity throughout the system.

This analysis is informed by the English experiment with large scale reform in the late 90s/early 2000s. The argument goes something like this (Hopkins, 2007):

- Most agreed that standards were too low and too varied in the 1990s and that some form of direct state intervention was necessary.
- However, when progress inevitably plateaued one has to question whether prescription, or more micro-management still guaranteed sustained large-scale reform in the medium term.
- The answer of course is to re-balance top down and bottom up and as competence and confidence increases give more responsibility to schools and system leaders to lead improvement efforts.



**Fig. 1** Toward system wide sustainable reform.

It is this progression that is illustrated in Fig. 1, where system wide reform is driven by system leadership. The intent of the diagram is to indicate that when a school or system is under performing i.e. has low levels of local capacity, then national prescription is necessary. As local capacity increases however, national prescription needs to gradually be replaced with local discretion. This is the re-balancing that is implied as one moves from the left-hand to the right-hand side of the diagram.

It is worth taking a little more time unpacking the thinking underlying the diagram. Five points need making.

The first is to emphasise that this not an argument against 'top down' change. It is clear that neither 'top down' nor 'bottom-up change' work just by themselves, they have to be in balance – in creative tension. The balance between the two at any one time will of course depend on context.

Secondly, it must be realised that in England in 1997 it was obvious that more central direction was needed. This reflects the balance toward national prescription as seen in the left-hand segment of the diagram.

Third it should be no surprise to realise that the right-hand segment is relatively unknown territory. It implies horizontal and lateral ways of working with assumptions and governance arrangements very different from what we know now. The main difficulty in imagining this landscape is that the thinking of most people is constrained by their experiences within the power structure and norms of the left-hand segment of the diagram.

The fourth point is both complex and critical. In terms of the diagram, effective system wide sustainable reform requires a movement from the left to right with all that implies. The left to right movement is necessarily incremental as it builds on, rather than contradicts, the success of previous phases. Yet, and this is the crucial point, the achievement of creating the educational landscape implied by the right-hand segment represents a step change from what has gone before. Yes, the difference between left and right-hand segments represents a radical change or a transformation; but the process or journey from left to right will be incremental, building on past success and re-shaping in light of learning from experience. It is in this way that the language of school improvement (logical incremental steps building on past experience) and transformation (a qualitatively different state from what was known previously) is reconciled.

Finally, of course it is not being suggested that one always has to start from the left-hand side of the diagram and move in some sort of uniform way to the right. That is just how it was in England in 1997. Other systems may well be in the middle and need to move left briefly to firm up certain conditions before rapidly proceeding into the right-hand segment. Some may believe that they are already in the right-hand segment. If this diagram has any value, it is as a heuristic – its purpose is to help people think rather than tell them what to do.

One further point needs to be re-iterated. As noted earlier, the transition from 'prescription' to 'professionalism' is not straight forward. In order to move from one to the other, strategies are required that not only continue to raise standards but also build capacity within the system. This point is key, one cannot just drive to continue to raise standards in an instrumental way, one also needs to develop social, intellectual and organisational capital. This also explains why the concept of "school-based management" by itself is insufficient to affect the transition from the left hand to the right-hand side of the diagram. It is system leadership rather than management that is required.

### The emergence of system leadership – the case of England

It was a policy context such as that described above that led to the emergence of System leaders in England in the early 2000s. At this time Ministers deliberately, strategically and boldly embraced the logic of Fig. 1, re-balanced top-down/bottom-up change policy initiatives and embraced system leadership and entered into a new relationship with schools.

In *Every School a Great School* (Hopkins, 2007) it was suggested that the five striking characteristics of system leaders, those distinguishing them from broader collaborative activity, are that they deploy their experience, knowledge and skills to:

- actively lead improvements in others schools and measure their success in terms of student learning, achievement and welfare, both to raise the bar and narrow the gap(s).
- commit staff in their own and other schools to the improvement of teaching and learning, engaging them deeply in the organization of teaching, learning, curriculum and assessment so as to ensure learning is increasingly personalized for students.
- lead the development of schools as personal and professional learning communities, building relationships across and beyond each school to provide a range of learning experiences and professional development opportunities.
- lead work for equity and inclusion through acting on context and culture, not only in response to poverty but also to employ educational resources to help give communities a greater sense of aspiration and empowerment.
- manage strategically the impact of the classroom, school and system on one another, understanding that in order to change the larger system one has to both engage with it in a meaningful way and manage subsequent change at a school level.

This set of five purposes or goals make a powerful case for system leadership. Taken as a whole, they address most of the issues or problems identified with the challenges introduced in the earlier section on defining system leadership.

It is a compelling proposition that such leadership holds significant potential to contribute to systemic educational improvement. It is an idea that was positively advocated by Government Ministers. David Miliband MP, for example, when Minister of State for School Standards, saw that the development and deployment of cadre of system leaders could go a long way to responding to the key challenges he had identified for school leadership as part of a new relationship between schools and Government (Miliband, 2004). This included raising productivity in education, effecting greater social justice and ensuring sustainable improvement (DfES, 2005; Miliband, 2003).

Further research identified a variety of system leader roles emerging in England and elsewhere (Higham et al., 2009). As it happens this taxonomy has received support from subsequent research as seen in Part 2 of this chapter. The role of the National Leader of Education (NLE) has developed considerably in response to these policy suggestions (Matthews, 2008); as has the concept of the system leader in a more global context (Hargreaves, 2012). The initial framework suggested the following roles (Hopkins and Higham, 2007):

- Developing and *leading a successful educational improvement partnership* between several schools, often focused on a set of specific themes that have significant and clear outcomes that reach beyond the capacity of any one single institution.
- Choosing to *lead and improve a school in extremely challenging circumstances* and change local contexts by building and sustaining a culture of success as a high valued added institution.
- *Partnering another school facing difficulties and improve it*, either as an Executive Head Principal of a Federation or as the leader of a more informal improvement arrangement.
- Acting as a *community leader* to broker and shape partnerships and/or networks of wider relationships across local communities to support children's welfare and potential, often through multi agency work.
- Working as a *change agent* or expert leader within the system, identifying best classroom practice and transferring it to support improvement in other's schools.

No doubt these roles will expand and mature over time. What is particularly interesting about them is how they have evolved in the recent past as a response to the adaptive challenge of system change. It is also important to note that the taxonomy includes system leaders working in either national or state programs as well as locally organised often *ad hoc* roles, a point that is picked up again below.

The underlying assumption of this chapter is that the real prize and potential of system leadership is the realisation of systemic improvement. It is important to appreciate a further insight that the aspiration of system transformation can be facilitated by the degree of segmentation existing in the system. Segmentation implies using the natural variation in school performance within the system as a means of improvement through collaboration (Hopkins, 2007).

There are two crucial aspects here. First, that there is increased clarity on the nature of intervention and support for schools at each phase of the performance cycle. Second, that schools at each phase are clear as to the most productive ways in which to collaborate in order to capitalise on the diversity within system. A summary of this 'segmentation' approach is set out in Table 1.

In the left-hand column is a basic taxonomy of secondary schools in England produced by the DfES in the mid 2000s based on their phase in the performance cycle. It is this that is the focus of the second column, where a range of strategies for supporting schools at different phases of their development are briefly described.

The key point to consider is that these different forms of intervention and support are increasingly being provided by schools themselves, rather than being imposed and delivered by some external agency. This approach to system transformation relies fundamentally on school-to-school support as the basis of the improvement strategy.



**Table 1** The 'segmentation approach' to school improvement.

<i>Type of school</i>	<i>Key strategies – responsive to context and need</i>
Leading Schools	Become leading practitioners
Succeeding, self-improving schools	Formal federation with lower-performing schools Regular local networking for school leaders
Succeeding schools with internal variations	Between-school curriculum development Consistency interventions: Such as assessment for learning Subject specialist support to particular curriculum areas
Underperforming schools	Linked school support for underperforming departments/year groups Underperforming pupil programs for catch-up
Low attaining schools	Formal support in Federation structure Consultancy in core subjects and best practice
Failing schools	Intensive support from system leader or Restart with new name and leadership

In this section of the chapter, the skills and potential roles of system leaders have been described as well as their strategic contribution to systemic improvement. This of course has been based in the English context, but the overall strategic approach is generic and can apply in a range of settings and jurisdictions. The skills themselves, the range of improvement categories and the terminology associated with intervention will vary from setting to setting and each system will have to develop its own language and framework suited to its own particular purposes and context. The crucial point being that not all schools are the same, each requires different forms of support and at each stage of development there will be a productive re-balancing between prescription and professionalism.

### Global perspectives on system leadership pre-2010

In the mid 2000s the OECD launched a major research and development program into School Leadership in participating countries. The program culminated in the publication of two books *Improving School Leadership, Volume 1: Policy and Practice* (Pont et al., 2008a), and *Improving School Leadership, Volume 2: Case Studies on System Leadership* (Pont et al., 2008b). The authors state that throughout OECD countries, there is a great deal of school leadership co-operation and collaboration going on. Practitioners do not work alone, and many benefit from a variety of networking arrangements or new structures that share management across schools. Although the authors were not able to gauge the extent of their success in most countries because they had not pursued the issue systematically, they did say that most initiatives had explicit objectives that concentrated on the following: sharing and rationalising resources, improving coherence of educational provision, supporting wellbeing and improving educational opportunities and outcomes (Pont et al., 2008a).

In fact, in all countries participating in the OECD Improving School Leadership activity, there were some arrangements for co-operation between schools. School leaders were the key to these and are also strongly influenced by them. In order to give a flavor of this activity **Table 2** lists different types of approaches and some of the reasons for co-operation across OECD countries.

To summarise, in this first part of the chapter we have discussed some of the theoretical underpinnings of System Leadership, described a framework for explaining its contribution to systemic reform, provided a case study of emerging practice in England, and reviewed briefly the adoption of collaborative ways of working in twelve countries. In Part 2, the discussion moves to a consideration of System leadership post 2010 as the practice begins to achieve maturity and is better embedded in the policy reforms in many countries.

## Part two<sup>1</sup>

### A macro and micro level framework for system leadership

The different interpretations and conceptualisations of system leaders/ship within the international evidence base post 2010 can be separated into *macro* and *micro* level explanations (Harris, 2020). These interpretations sometimes cross-over, making much of the writing on the subject complex to navigate (Boylan, 2016). To make sense of these different interpretations, and the inter-relationships between them, it is helpful to explore system leaders/ship through macro and micro level lenses, respectively. **Fig. 2** illustrates the different interpretations and the inter-relationships.

<sup>1</sup>**Acknowledgment** - this section is based upon an unpublished report, on the topic of system leaders and leadership, prepared by one of the authors for the National Academy for Educational Leadership in Wales (Harris, 2020).

**Table 2** Different types of approaches to school leader collaboration across OECD countries (Pontet et al., 2008a).

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**Belgium** - School communities have been created as voluntary collaborative partnerships between schools. They aim to have common staffing, ICT and welfare resources management.

**Denmark** - Co-operation in post-compulsory education has been promoted by the creation of administrative groups set up locally or regionally to optimise the joint resources of several self-governing institutions.

**Finland** - 2003 legislative reform has enhanced school co-operation aiming to ensure integrity of students' study paths.

**France** - "school basins" have been implemented to ensure collaborative partnerships between schools to work together in student orientation, educational coherence between different types of schools, common management of shared material and human resources.

**Hungary** - "micro-regional partnerships" based on economic and professional rationalisation have resulted in the spreading of common school maintenance in almost all Hungarian micro regions. This network-type co-operation enables professional and organisational learning leading to new forms of education governance and efficient innovation.

**Korea** - small schools cooperate to overcome problems of size in teacher exchange, curriculum organising, joint development activities, and integrated use of facilities.

**Netherlands** - In primary education, "upper management" takes management function responsibility for several schools. About 80% of primary school boards have an upper school management bureau for central management, policy staff and support staff.

**New Zealand** - school clusters are based around geographical communities and communities of interest.

**Norway** - tendency is to merge several schools to form an administrative unit governed by a school principal. Three-level municipalities require networks between schools.

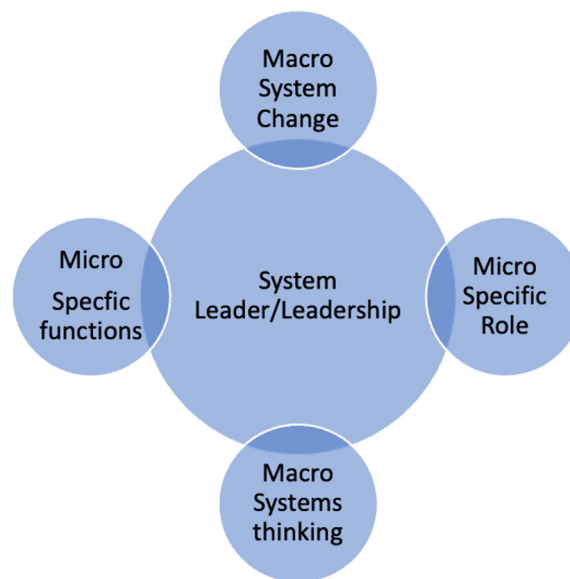
**Portugal** - schools are commonly grouped together with a collective management structure; executive, pedagogical and administrative councils are responsible for their areas.

**Scotland** - important political promotion of collaboration. "Heads together" is a nationwide online community for sharing leadership experience.

**Sweden** - municipal directors of education steer principals. Most of them are members of director of education steering group where strategy, development and results are discussed.

**England** - there are different approaches to co-operation stimulated by the government – federations of schools, national leaders of education, school improvement partners ...

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**Fig. 2** A Macro and Micro level framework for system leadership.

### Macro level

At the macro level, the evidence on system leaders/ship diverges into two major areas of study. Firstly, as was seen earlier, there is a literature on *systems thinking* and *systems theory* that focuses on ways of solving complex problems within and across organisations (e.g. Levin and Schrum, 2013). Secondly, there is a considerable evidence base around system leaders/ship as a policy driver for system change and as the mobilisation of system improvement in different countries and contexts (e.g. Harris et al., 2014; Cousin, 2016; Nasmyth, 2012; Hamilton et al., 2018).

As intimated earlier, systems-thinking, is an approach that is concerned with taking a holistic view of the system. It is a management approach to organisational change that has been applied to schools and connects with closely system science (Shaked and Schechter, 2020). Systems thinking reflects a theoretical orientation on organizational change rather than a practical one. It is viewed as an approach for understanding change within complex systems.



Systems thinking as Fullan (2005) noted places an emphasis upon system thinkers rather than system leaders, reinforcing the capacities of individual leaders within a specific eco-system (Shaked and Schechter, 2014; Toh et al., 2014). Systems thinking is also linked to idea of systemic leadership that appears within the business literature (e.g. Thompson and Zakhirova, 2019) which views organisations as open systems that are visible and inter-connected (Beehner, 2020).

In the second area of study, system leaders/ship is represented and understood as a policy lever for school and system improvement. In this respect, system leadership is presented as an adaptive leadership style or disposition that is based on an understanding of the complexity of educational contexts as involving multiple, interrelated systems. System leadership at the macro level focuses on how leadership is exercised for the greater good and how *capacity* is built to deliver system wide change and improvement.

The international literature reflects an extensive evidential base around system leaders/ship as a policy driver for system improvement. In Canada, Finland, Georgia, England, Hong Kong, New York, Latin America, Singapore, Scotland, Australia and New Zealand there are specific examples of policy interventions, around system leader/ship, directly aimed at building the capacity for school/system improvement (Mitchell and Sackney, 2016; Sentocnick et al., 2016; Elwick, 2017; Weinstein and Hernández, 2015; Hamilton et al., 2018; Hopkins 2016; Mowat, 2018; McNaughton et al., 2011; Watterston et al., 2011; Dimmock, 2016; Simon, 2015; Smeds-Nylund et al., 2016; Southworth and Quesnay 2005; Szeto, 2019; Ng, 2017).

System leadership is essentially defined, at the macro level, as having a systemic orientation where system leaders influence those beyond their immediate context and are deliberately deployed to bring about large-scale change. This interpretation has been seen in policy developments in England (Cousin, 2019; Close, 2016) and in many other countries (Pont et al., 2008c).

The implementation of a system model, it has been argued, happens when all stakeholders are active co-collaborators in the modeling of solution seeking processes (Wilkinson, 2016). Within the international evidence base, there are frequent references to system leaders as solution seekers and change agents, as levers for system level change and improvement.

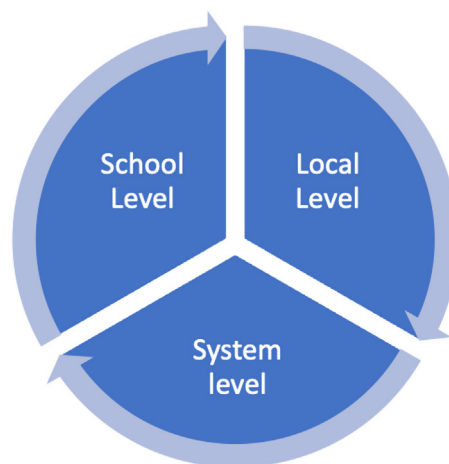
The academic literature similarly reinforces the centrality of system leaders/ship as a macro lever for school and system wide change. For example, Cousin (2018) views system leaders/ship as a public service delivery mechanism within a narrative of global governance. Focusing on England, Cousin (2018) outlines findings from a longitudinal study that demonstrates a positive relationship between system leaders (National Leaders of Education) and school/system improvement. Brown and Greany (2018) also turn their attention to the English education system but offer a more critical view of the evidence about system leaders/ship and its relationship with the self-improving system. Other writers offer examples of system leaders/ship in various settings (e.g. Naicker, 2015; Bryant, 2018; Godfrey, 2017) each reinforcing that system leadership is a macro policy lever and a catalyst for system wide change (Hamilton et al., 2018).

In the macro sense, therefore, system leaders are collectively charged with the development of others and the improvement of the system (Sheppard and Dibbon, 2011; Hopkins et al., 2014) where their sphere of influence varies according to role, responsibility, and level.

### Micro level

Moving to the micro-level, re-positions the idea of system leaders/ship away from the collective spheres of influence toward individual functions, roles, traits, or characteristics (Accardi, 2016; Dimmock, 2016). In his work, Hopkins (2009) suggests that system leaders operate at *three levels* –.

1. The level of the school i.e. helping other schools.
2. The local level i.e. working with networks of schools or at the national level.
3. The national/system level i.e. operating as a leader of system change (e.g a National Leader of Education) (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3** The three levels of System Leadership.

Hopkins (2009) further suggests that all these system leader roles are necessary and operate interdependently to secure system level change. This tripartite distinction suggests that system leaders need to understand the micro and macro influences in the system to be most effective. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) suggest that system leaders must exist on 'the balcony and the dancefloor'. In summary, system leaders not only need to see the bigger picture, but they also need to understand the detail of how to secure change.

The international evidence is replete with accounts of the work of different categories of system leaders e.g. headteacher, principal, district leader, network leader, middle leader or teacher leader (Robinson, 2012; Senge et al., 2015; Cousin, 2019; Boylan, 2016). This evidence base proposes that those occupying existing *leadership roles* within the system are, by default, system leaders with the potential to exercise leadership throughout the system. Simkins et al. (2019) focus on primary heads and argue that through their leadership within the system it is possible to have a vision of a school led system. Spillane et al. (2019) focuses on six school systems in the USA and argues that school leaders are system leaders who affect change and improvement through the processes of sense making.

In their work, Senge et al. (2015) talk about core capabilities for system leader/ship that include the ability to see the needs of the larger system, fostering reflection, building collective engagement, and not being reactive but shaping the future. Earley (2016) similarly offers a series of expectations of system leaders but these tend toward the aspirational rather than the practical.

To summarise, the contemporary evidence base views system leaders/ship as a macro level policy driver and a micro level role or responsibility. The literature reflects three distinctive but interrelated interpretations:

- system leaders/ship *as* system change – e.g. in Singapore, leaders within the system (school, district, and Ministry) collectively operate *as* system change agents (Ng, 2017).
- system leaders/ship *for* system change -e.g. in England, system leaders, (National Leaders of Education) are responsible *for* leading system change (Cousin, 2018)
- system leaders/ship *through* system change - e.g. in Ontario, system change produced literacy co-ordinators and champions who became system leaders *as a direct result of* system wide change (Gallagher et al., 2016)

The next section aims to illuminate these different interpretations further, by offering country specific examples of system leader/leadership.

### System leader and system leadership – selected country examples

As seen previously, over a decade ago, the OECD (Pont et al., 2008) highlighted several country cases where system leader/ship was present and prevalent including those summarised here. The short examples that follow (Australia, Singapore, England, and Canada) offer contemporary insights into how system leadership is currently interpreted, understood, and enacted in different contexts. Each of the examples is informed by policy evidence, collected as part of this review, and recent communication with identified country experts.

#### Australia

To begin with, two experts from Australia offer some important insights into system leaders/leadership in their context:

In Australia, system leadership varies by school type. For government schools, the state or territory Department of Education will have the most system leadership influence and this will have central and regional components. Yet, principals and other school leaders have an equally important role in school success. For Catholic schools, the main system leadership will come from the local diocese. For Independent schools it will vary according to whether they are part of a system or not. As well as this, governance at the school level varies greatly and this will impact on the influence of systems and the work of principals (Gurr, 2020<sup>2</sup>).

In NSW, the term system leadership, is used to describe the role of senior educators who occupy formal positions that have the responsibility of supporting the effectiveness of schools and school leaders. In NSW, the term system leadership is also used to describe educators who voluntarily undertake roles, with the purpose of contributing to the development of other educators beyond those within their own school. These roles generally include, supporting the professional learning of others as an in-program facilitator, or leading a local network with a focus on an area of educational interest such as curriculum, ICT, or leadership development. Current research regarding in-program facilitators, indicates that the key drivers for educators to undertake these roles include-

- a commitment to the profession and the well-being of the public education system,
- a desire to engage in professional learning through supporting the learning of others,
- a desire to network with, and expand their sphere of influence, beyond the school (McIntyre, 2020<sup>3</sup>).

<sup>2</sup>Personal Communication.

<sup>3</sup>Personal Communication.

### Singapore

In Singapore, system leadership is *the* central way that all system change is delivered. School leaders, at all levels, are prepared from day one to take up responsibilities anywhere in the education system, including the Ministry. The National Institute of Education (NIE) trains all teachers and leaders, throughout the country, to a consistently high standard. It prepares them to develop other leaders at all levels in the system. When a teacher is identified as being capable of a leadership responsibility, the final beneficiary is often another school. When the teacher is ready for a leadership position, they may be identified (by the Ministry of Education) to be posted to another school that needs them more or where a better opportunity for further development is available.

In Singapore, teachers and principals are allocated to their posts by the Ministry, it is not their personal choice. Many capable heads of department, who have been in one school, become vice-principals in another school. Similarly, many capable vice-principals, who have worked extensively in one school, will eventually leave, and lead another school. Many highly effective principals join the district or the Ministry level.

In this way leadership positions and responsibilities are rotated in the system. So, in Singapore, school leaders know that they are developing people for the system, rather than just for one school. This is a system high in trust and collaboration. School leaders also trust the system to provide the human resources the school needs (Ng (2017)).

In Singapore, school leaders do not just lead a school. They are called to lead 'nationally'. That means that a school leader belongs to a community of leaders. School leaders care for the whole education system, not just the school each of them is currently leading. They must take a broader view and consider how their decisions in school will affect other schools or even the whole nation. Social capital in Singapore is 'nationalistic'. This is the spirit of competitive collaboration. Centralized decentralization can work because the spirit of competitive collaboration helps to drive improvement while keeping the system united (Ng, 2020<sup>4</sup>).

### An update on England

In England, the concept of system leadership continues to mature and the 'self-improving school-led system' (SISS) is now the overarching narrative for education policy. This agenda has encompassed an ensemble of reforms since 2010 including academies, the promotion of multi-academy trusts (MATs), the roll back of local authorities (LAs) from school oversight, and the development of new school-to-school support models, such as Teaching School Alliances (TSAs). The government's rationale for this mix of reforms is, ostensibly, to move control to the frontline by giving greater autonomy to schools. To support the SISS, a tranche of National Leaders of Education (NLE's) currently operates to mobilise change across the system and to act as system leaders for school self-improvement. NLE's tend to be high performing leaders and their teams (e.g. as National Leaders of Education or Teaching Schools) who are designated and deployed to support other schools (Earley and Greany, 2017).

Prior to 2010, there was a broad interpretation of system leadership in England (Hopkins and Higham, 2007). Any school leader who played a role beyond their context could consider themselves as engaging in 'system leadership'. Latterly, however, system leaders are formally designated as NLE's with clear lines of accountability to government. The primary function of the NLEs is to deliver school improvement support on behalf of the Department for Education in England (DfE, 2021). The core purpose of the NLE is to deliver support to underperforming schools, helping them to identify and address areas in need of improvement.

Within England tensions exist, however, within the NLE system leadership role. On the one hand, system leaders (NLEs) are encouraged and expected by government to drive relentless and rapid improvement across multiple schools. On the other hand, they are expected simultaneously to address other 'school-led' policy priorities, such as to expand the numbers of trainees on school-led Initial Teacher Training routes. NLEs are charged with working on behalf of the self-improving system, engaging their peers in building collaborative alliances while operating in a competitive marketplace for school improvement services (Greany, 2018).

Greany and Higham (2018) in *Hierarchy, Markets and Networks* highlighted that NLEs in England were experiencing conflicting and unreasonable demands from central government while being perceived by their peers to be a 'co-opted elite', working as part of the managerial state and accruing a range of personal and organizational benefits as a result. Concerns about the NLE role have also been raised because of the importance placed on the Ofsted 'Outstanding grade' to designate those selected as system leaders.

System leaders all identified benefits from their roles, but there are also a series of challenges, including significant pressure to make short-term improvements in other schools and the fear that their own school might drop in performance as a result of their external work

Greany (2020)<sup>5</sup>.

### Ontario, Canada

Since 2007, the Province of Ontario in Canada has successfully embarked on a major reform process, largely but not exclusively focusing on improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for young people, particularly those who are most disadvantaged

<sup>4</sup>Personal Communication.

<sup>5</sup>Personal Communication.

(Campbell, 2020). Ontario's educational reform agenda has concentrated consistently on raising the bar and narrowing the achievement gap and on increasing the rates of high school completion.

An important and prominent part of this reform agenda has been the focus on system leadership across the Province. A by-product of system level reform in Ontario has been the attention paid to building professional capacity and leadership capacity at all levels of the education system (province, district, school, and classroom). A central element of this focus has been developing leaders and leadership practices at all levels of the education system. In this respect, system leaders/ship in Ontario has emerged through large-scale system level change. The following two quotes from *Our Call to Action* (National Academy for Educational Leadership Wales 2019, p.11) offer insights into the role of the system leader in Ontario:

One of the strengths of the system is a comprehensive, well-established Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF) providing valued support for professional learning, into roles as centrally assigned principals and beyond as superintendents. This provides a clear pathway for developing future leaders in the system. Principals and vice-principals are allocated from a central pool to schools by the Toronto Board of Education with the expectation that they remain in one school for approximately five years

Nevertheless, there is a compromise to be made, as the expectation to move schools can affect the well-being of principals. However, principals are well supported in their roles by centrally assigned principals who are all experienced leaders. This leads to a high level of trust and mutual respect, which in turn creates an ethos of support rather than challenge in the system

All the country examples reflect the fact that system leaders/ship within and across educational organisations is still considered important to build the necessary professional capital and professional capacity for improvement. As this review of post 2010 practice has highlighted, there is evidence that when properly deployed, system leaders/ship can be a positive force for system change and transformation.

### Part three

#### Toward the future and a reflection

The substance of the previous two parts of this chapter suggests that the concept of system leadership is an idea whose time has come. One can characterise contemporary practice by saying that system leadership is increasingly being seen as:

- A wider resource for school improvement, making more of the most successful school leaders' by encouraging and enabling them to identify and transfer best practice, reduce the risk of innovation in other schools and lead partnerships that improve and diversify educational pathways for students within and across localities.
- A more authentic response to low attaining schools. Strong leadership is vital to turn these schools around. However, a central challenge is that these schools are often the least able to attract suitable leaders. The most successful heads hold the potential to impact on these schools, which need their expertise, by working to develop and mobilize leadership capacity in the pursuit of whole school improvement.
- A potential means to resolve, in the longer term, the emerging and related challenges of a declining demographic supply of well-qualified school leaders, falling student rolls and hence increasingly non-viable schools, and yet ongoing pressures to sustain educational provision in all localities. The evidence cited here suggests that system leadership solutions may include fewer head teachers across some groups of schools, new challenges and incentives for the retention of the most experienced head teachers, as well as new development opportunities for deputies and middle leaders to experience aspects of headship at first hand before taking on full head teacher responsibilities.

Before we get too carried away with such enthusiasm for the concept of system leadership, however, we need to admit that much of the well-intentioned advocacy is based on aspiration and individual cases rather than systemic evidence. Despite its attractiveness as a new catalyst for system change there are a range of challenges to be faced up to if we are to avoid a simplified and uncritical approach to system leadership. We have several concerns:

- First, there is currently no clear or systemic knowledge of how leaders undertake system leadership roles.
- Second, there is insufficient evidence of effectiveness including on the proportion of system leaders who are successful, their impact in different contexts and what might constitute best practice.
- Third, there is no certainty that sufficient leadership quality and crucially whole school capacity already exists to provide a platform on which to develop a wide range of effective and sustainable system leadership roles.
- Fourth, it is not always clear how capacity is renewed within the schools from which system leaders work, especially those in challenging circumstances.
- Fifth, there is no consensus about how best (or who is best placed) to deploy and develop a range of existing and aspirant system leaders to ensure that they gain the skills, experience and support needed to be effective.

- And sixth, there is a wider debate within the head teacher profession about how to reconcile on the one hand an impetus for collaboration between schools with on the other hand an accountability system focused on individual schools (which has the potential to act as an impetus for competition). This perceived tension certainly does not circumscribe nascent system leadership, but it is an important contextual dimension when wider systemic roles are being considered or developed.

In reflecting on these concerns however, there is an overarching challenge to face. It is the distinction between system leaders working in Governmental or State programmes and those working in locally organised often *ad hoc* roles.

As seen in **Part Two**, the majority of system leaders increasingly operate in Governmental or Regional programs that have incentivised activity through organisation, funding and professional development - this is the 'enabling state' at work. It is an important strategy for encouraging Heads and Principals to lead technical and adaptive solutions in a widening professional domain of cross-school and system improvement. It is a phenomenon that is increasingly being seen in those school systems that are accelerating up the PISA international benchmarking scales.

More freedom exists on the other side of the divide, in the roles that are locally developed, often *ad hoc* and contextually responsive. It is understandable why many conceive of these roles to be a more authentic form of system leadership. With no single framework or protocol, a range of models are developed in relation to specific needs and times. Furthermore, from this perspective, the role of an 'enabling state' becomes focused on reducing both barriers to collaboration and wider policy disincentives at all levels. On the other hand, it encourages agencies to provide specific support in networking and bespoke professional development to individual system leaders.

There are of course variations to this bottom up/top-down distinction that are beyond the scope of this chapter and will be dependent on a range of criteria. If, however, a shared criterion is to develop effective system leadership in a growing number of schools, then the following suggestions for action may prove instructive.

**Suggestion One: Incentivise rather than legislate.** The traditional response has been intervention and management from Governmental, State and Federal Agencies. The argument here is that this leadership now needs to come more from Heads and Principals themselves or from agencies committed to working with them in authentic ways. It is clear that the more bureaucratic the response, the less likely it will be to work. A more lateral approach may be to create the conditions within the system to promote system leadership and collaborative activity through for example, adjusting accountability requirements, and funding for capacity building. With the right incentives in place schools will naturally move toward these new ways of working and mold them to the context in which they operate and to the challenges they face.

**Suggestion Two: Place the agency close to the school.** There are now in many systems, system leadership roles whose remit is specifically school improvement. The intention that must be maintained is that instead of creating a new bureaucracy, their brief is increasingly focused on facilitating relationships between schools to maximise the potential of purposive collaboration. This approach to school transformation is made increasingly possible by the range of sophisticated data potentially available on school and student performance. It enables groups of schools to identify (a) issues where they shared both strengths and weaknesses i.e. their capacity for sharing, and (b) common issues where they are likely to need some external input.

**Suggestion Three: Use school 'independence' collaboratively to tackle underperformance.** The underlying assumption here is that autonomous schools working collaboratively is a particularly appropriate organisational format for contexts where rapid transformation of standards and support for students are most needed. The key point is that the freedoms associated with increased autonomy can be used to promote collaboration and inclusion to directly address the needs of students. The crucial condition is that all schools accept responsibility for the education of all the students within their geographic area.

The purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate that system leadership represents a powerful combination of practices that give us a glimpse of the crucial importance of leadership in the new educational landscape. The collective sharing of skills, expertise and experience creates much richer and more sustainable opportunities for rigorous transformation than can ever be provided by isolated institutions. Realising this landscape, however, may also require a bigger shift within the broader education system, in particular, by giving school leaders more agency to take the lead – in short to light their own fires. The future is certainly theirs.

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