



System improvement through collective capacity building

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to outline how collective capacity building is supporting system-wide reform in one country. It seeks to outline the way in which professional learning communities within, between and across schools are creating an infrastructure for improving professional practice and raising standards.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is both descriptive and analytical. It draws on the international literature pertaining to system-wide reform and the empirical evidence concerning professional learning.

Findings – The paper highlights some of the challenges in building the collective capacity for change throughout an entire system and reflects on progress to date. The paper concludes by arguing that despite the compelling case for collective capacity building, the real test is to make it happen.

Research limitations/implications – The professional learning communities (PLC) programme in Wales is gathering evidence about impact but as the programme is just completing its first year of implementation these findings are not yet available.

Originality/value – This paper adds to prior analyses and discussion of collective capacity building by providing a system-wide perspective.

Keywords System reform, Professional learning communities, Collective capacity, Change management, Professional learning, Learning, Wales

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Across the globe there is currently a preoccupation with whole system reform. Fuelled by various international league tables of performance, many countries are grappling with transforming their education systems. While the school effectiveness and school improvement research fields have taken us so far in understanding how to change schools for the better, it is clear that transforming education systems one school at a time is no longer a feasible or desirable option. The demand for radical and large-scale improvement in education is too fierce, too pressing and is shared on an international scale (Levin, 2010; Hallinger, 2010). Replicating or recasting previous reform strategies will not provide the lift in performance now urgently required by many school systems. The history of educational change is littered with borrowed or duplicated reform strategies that simply have made little or lasting difference to school or system

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performance. As Payne (2008, p. 4) notes there has been “so much reform but so little change” and after a couple of decades of being energetically reformed, most schools, especially the bottom tier schools, and most school systems seem to be pretty much the same kind of organization that they were at the beginning.

But why does so much reform fail? While the specifics of each case may differ there are a number of common denominator factors that can be identified. First, schools and school systems are often expected to change too rapidly. Immediate gains in achievement are often fuelled by a strong political imperative where timescales are much shorter than those required for deep, sustainable change. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) associate the failure of large-scale reform with the reckless speed of change and the desire to scale up far too quickly. They note that the desire for immediate returns on investment, frequently politically motivated, means that change is often introduced at a sprinting pace, sometimes before there is sufficient evidence to suggest that scaling up is first, desirable and second, sensible. Hargreaves and Fink (2006, p. 14), reinforce how “results reach a plateau when speed matters more than substance”. The desire for change is often politically motivated by the need for change itself, any type of change, regardless of its focus or intent. This results in change overload which not only saps energy and motivation but also introduces contradictions and distractions into the system (Cheng and Walker, 2008). Consequently, the conveyor belt of new initiatives keeps moving accompanied by the inevitable peaks and troughs associated with quick, ill thought through or superficial change.

Second, there has been an over-reliance on the “wrong drivers” for system reform (Fullan, 2011a). One of the “wrong drivers” is an over-reliance on external accountability to deliver results. While punitive forces may work initially, evidence suggests that high performing systems balance pressure and support; they empower people to perform while holding them accountable for performance. They make decisions about mandating versus persuading and tend not to set quantitative targets or publish comparative performance data (McKinsey, 2010, p. 3). In many countries, the limitation of buying into standardized reform is now becoming evident. Improved performance fuelled by league tables, targets and prescriptive strategies is simply not proving to be sustainable. Similarly, the punitive and aggressive nature of policies such as “No child left behind” has proved to be counterproductive in the race to raise educational standards. As Levin notes (2008, p. 7) “No Child Left Behind” and other similar policies have at best distracted people from the requirement of real improvement, and at worse have done significant damage to public education. Improvement is much more likely in systems that are supported rather than punished and where there is a concerted effort to support and motivate educators rather than rely on simple accountability measures to ratchet up their performance.

Third, the failure of educational reform efforts is most often characterized by an abject failure to consider and undertake, with any rigor or robustness, the process of implementation (Fullan, 2011a). High performing systems know how to diagnose performance accurately, clearly and brutally (Spillane and Coldren, 2011). They combine the right change strategies and approaches but they also know how to implement them most effectively (Fullan, 2011a, b). It is no longer sufficient to have the right change agenda or the best ideas for innovation or transformation – it is imperative that there is a compelling and effective means of implementing them. Vision may be important “but so is the much less glorious work of looking after all the details

that make things work” (Levin, 2008, p. 3). Much has been written about educational change and the need to do things differently to achieve better outcomes. There has been far less to say on exactly how to make things work and far less commentary on the hard and much less exciting hard slog of implementation.

The critical issue of implementation leads directly into the important consideration of capacity building. While bright, shiny policies and innovations tend to get all the attention at the outset, without attention to proper implementation and associated capacity building they are unlikely to succeed. However well intentioned or well funded the approach to system reform may be; it will be destined to fail without serious and sustained attention to building the capacity for change. The central element in any successful change process is what Fullan (2010a, b) describes as “capacity building with a focus on results”. Innovation may be necessary but it not sufficient to secure improvement, new ideas come, and new ideas go. What is needed is a clear implementation strategy for those new ideas and the capacity to secure productive change, whatever obstacles there may be. Without deliberate, purposeful, and targeted capacity building, any attempt at implementation, is likely to flounder leaving behind it the rhetoric rather than the reality of change.

High performing systems tend to focus on a small number of ambitious goals and build the capacity to deliver them (Fullan, 2010a; Levin, 2010). These goals tend to be clearly related to the improvement of professional practice in order to improve student learning. If the quality of an education system cannot outperform the quality of its teachers then unless we can change what teachers do in classrooms they student learning outcomes are unlikely to change (McKinsey, 2010). Securing lasting educational improvement therefore is primarily, but not exclusively, a case of improving teaching and learning. While this is easy to say, it is notoriously hard to achieve. The literature on educational change shows time and again the stubborn resistance that any reform process automatically encounters along with an overwhelming desire to return to normative practices. As Levin (2008, p. 81) emphasizes “change is hard to do and takes sustained effort [. . .] gradually we have come to learn that real change requires will, skill and capacity”.

Capacity building has been shown to be an essential component of any successful reform process, improvement strategy, initiative, or intervention (Fullan, 2011a). Without purposeful, focused, and sustained capacity building, evidence shows that implementation will be superficial at worst and uneven at best where any learning gains are likely to be short-lived (Fullan, 2010b). But what is meant by capacity-building at the whole system level, how does it happen, what exactly are the challenges? This paper outlines the approach taken by one country to build the collective professional capacity to fuel system level change. It explores how the large-scale implementation of professional learning communities (PLCs) within, between, and across schools is establishing an infrastructure for improving professional practice.

Capacity building

The idea of capacity building is far from new. The school improvement field has consistently pointed to the centrality and importance of building the capacity for change (Hopkins and Jackson, 2003; Stoll and Seashore Louis, 2007; Lambert, 2007; Crowther, 2011). However, it is worth taking some time to consider what is meant by

capacity building and what form or forms of capacity building is most likely to contribute to system level change? The notion of capacity building has been linked to a wide range of different constructs and concepts. These range from Meyer's (1992) general notion of "readiness", or a staff's preparedness to deal with change, through to Senge's (1990) image of the "learning organisation" which also reflects Mitchell and Sackney's (2000) latter interpretation of capacity building as commensurate with a "learning community" and deep cultural change. As Elmore (2003, p. 11) outlines:

The development of systematic knowledge about and related to, large scale instructional improvement requires a change in the prevailing culture of administration and teaching in schools. Cultures do not change by mandate: they change by the specific displacement of existing norms, structures and processes by others; the process of cultural change depends fundamentally on modelling new values and behaviour that you expect to displace the existing ones.

Fullan (2010a, p. 57) has suggested that "capacity building concerns competencies, resources and motivation. Individuals and groups are high in capacity if they possess and continue to develop the knowledge and skills [. . .] if they are committed to putting the energy to get important things done collectively and continuously". Essentially, capacity building implies that people take the opportunity to do things differently, to learn new skills and to generate more effective practice. Sharrat and Fullan (2009) argue that capacity building must be systemic if it is going to make a performance difference for all schools furthermore they argue for systemic capacity building – broad (every school) and deep (every classroom). They note that capacity building "is a highly complex, dynamic, knowledge-building process, intended to lead to increased student achievement in every school. To achieve that goal, consideration must be given to the approaches that will result in systemic capacity building" (Sharrat and Fullan, 2009, p. 8).

It is this notion of systemic capacity building that will be drawn on in this paper as a way of analysing one approach to large scale, countrywide reform. Rather than describe, dissect and deconstruct the concept of capacity building, the intention here is to illustrate and illuminate how one system is attempting to actively build the professional capacity for change. While this is still very much work in progress it is a genuine attempt to transform an entire education system by establishing an infrastructure for changing professional practice.

In his work Fullan (2010a, 2011a, b) argues that purposeful collaboration is one way of ensuring that there is coherence and centrality of purpose within any reform process. He notes "within – school or (intraschool) collaboration, when it is focused, produces powerful results on an ongoing basis" (Fullan, 2010b, p. 36). The main argument here is that capacity building requires collective responsibility where professionals are working together to improve practice through mutual support, mutual accountability and mutual challenge. The evidence from the McKinsey (2010, p. 11) report also shows that "for a system's improvement journey to be sustained over the long term, the improvements have to be integrated into the very fabric of the system pedagogy". The report further suggests that there are three ways that improving systems achieve this – "by establishing collaborative practices, by developing a mediating layer between the schools and the centre and by architecting tomorrow's leadership" (McKinsey, 2010, p. 11).

The message about the power of collective working in building the capacity for system level change is one that is consistent in contemporary writing about educational change (Fullan, 2010a, b, 2011a, b; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2011; Levin, 2010). Collaborative practice is where teachers work together to develop effective instructional practices and where there is a deep commitment to improving the practice of others as well as their own. Hattie (2010, p. 35) notes that “the biggest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching”. In addition, the greatest gains are secured where these collaborative practices shift the drive for improvement away from the centre and bring it closer to the front line of teaching and learning.

But what does a model of collective capacity for system reform look like in action? How does an entire system invest in this way of working without relying on mandates or prescription? The answer to this question is partly answered by focusing on two successful change processes in Canada, the first in Ontario (Levin, 2008, 2010) and the second in York Region District School Board in Toronto (Sharrat and Fullan, 2009; Fullan, 2011a). In both cases, the reform process paid attention to a small number of specific goals and deliberately built a powerful infrastructure for professional learning and change. In Ontario the four key organization supports for change were:

- (1) Engagement and commitment by the adults in the system.
- (2) Effective collective processes for educators to continue to improve their practices (often referred to as professional learning communities).
- (3) Aligned, coherent, and supportive system policies and practices.
- (4) Appropriate allocation of resources (Levin, 2008, p. 120).

In Toronto the main levers of change were:

- using data to drive instruction and the selection of resources;
- building administrators’ and teachers’ capacity for focused literacy assessment and literacy instruction; and
- establishing professional learning communities across all schools to share successful practice (Sharrat and Fullan, 2009, p. 14).

Looking more broadly across other high performing systems, the existence of an infrastructure where educators generated, exchanged and challenged practice is a consistently important contributor to raising performance (McKinsey, 2010). Constantly improving the quality of teachers and teaching is a key feature of all high performing education systems. But just creating communities of professionals will not provide the ongoing improvements in teacher quality and teaching quality needed. It is what those professional communities focus on that matter most. Without a clear focus on learner needs there is a danger that professional learning communities will be little more than loosely coupled or configured groups that are unable to secure meaningful change or improvement. As Levin (2008, p. 127) notes it is easy for the learning community to pay attention to everything but the real work of looking at and improving everyone’s instructional practice. Real improvement through professional learning communities means focusing on the needs of the learner first and working relentlessly to improve pedagogy so those needs are effectively met (Harris and Jones, 2010, 2011).

In order to build the capacity for system level change, there needs to be a strong platform, for professional engagement, but the real challenge is actually doing it. Any

change is hard to do and requires sustained effort, drive and support. However change at scale is ever harder as the potential for distraction, diversion and interference are even greater. In Wales[1] a major reform effort is underway and there is a deliberate attempt to build the collective capacity for system wide change (Andrews, 2011). The next section provides some contextual background and outlines how professional learning communities are being established to build collective capacity and to create a dynamic infrastructure for system wide change.

Building collective capacity

Wales is a country that is deeply proud of its education system and its educational achievements. Recently however it has to face some brutal facts about its comparative performance on both the national (UK) and international stage. The PISA[2] results over two consecutive periods of measurement starkly underscore that the education system in Wales is not performing as well as many believed, many thought or many would have liked. In the 2010 PISA results Wales was ranked lowest among the UK countries and performed less well than many of the OECD countries that could claim a similar profile, size or composition. Unlike England, the Welsh Education system is one devoid of an imposed testing regime and it has consistently resisted the worst excesses of standardisation and accountability. However the national and international data shows significant “within school variation” that cannot be easily explained by the fact that Wales, unlike some other OECD countries, has a totally inclusive and non selective system. Instead, the data reveals a consistent and persistent issue with the quality and outcomes of teaching and learning, across all subjects and phases. The data also signals a significant challenge with standards of achievement in literacy and numeracy.

Some of the challenges recently highlighted by PISA had been anticipated. In 2007/2008 the Welsh Assembly Government introduced a National School Effectiveness Framework (SEF) to commence system wide change that would subsequently result in improved outcomes for all students. The School Effectiveness Framework[3] is based on research evidence and remains the overarching policy document that continues to define the direction of improvement in Wales. The main aspiration behind the “School effectiveness framework” is one of raising standards of achievement and “securing success for each student in every setting” (SEF, 2008). The main motivation is changing an entire education system so that all young people in Wales can reach their potential. Underpinning system wide reform is the notion of “tri-level reform” where capacity is built at the district, school and community level (Sharrat and Fullan, 2009, p. 48). Part of the capacity building process in Wales has been the large-scale adoption and implementation of professional learning communities (Harris and Jones, 2010, 2011).

As Resnick (2010, p. 2) notes, “collaborative routines among teachers are an important component in securing improved student learning outcomes”. These collaborative routines have been described in various ways but are best described as “professional learning communities”. The model of professional learning communities in Wales is grounded in the knowledge and experience that has been gained over many years about the benefits of encouraging professionals to work together collaboratively (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Guskey, 1986; Louis and Kruse, 1995). It has been informed, by the extensive literature, about professional learning (Timperley *et al.*, 2007), and the

empirical evidence concerning the relationship between professional learning communities, and student achievement (Vescio *et al.*, 2008).

Despite a great deal of writing on the subject of professional learning communities, conceptual pluralism and issues of competing definitions remain (Lomos *et al.*, 2011; Plank, 1997). Inevitably interpretations vary, as do views about the potential of professional learning communities to impact on student achievement. The research evidence on this issue is important as there is an inherent danger that professional learning communities could become a convenient “catch all” term for any type of collaboration, group or working party. The key question is, when properly constituted and established, can professional learning communities make a difference to student achievement? The answer to this question is fairly straightforward. The review of the empirical evidence by Vescio *et al.* (2008) concluded:

... the collective results of these studies offer an unequivocal answer to the question about whether the literature supports the assumption that student learning increases when teachers participate in professional learning communities. The answer is resounding and encouraging, yes (p. 97).

More recently, in their meta-analysis Lomos *et al.* (2011) highlight a significant and positive effect of professional learning communities on student achievement and notes that they are also related “to a large number of other predictors of student achievement” (p. 140). Therefore there is a basis for believing that building collective professional capacity, primarily but not exclusively through professional learning communities, can secure improvements in student achievement.

In 2009/2010 professional learning communities (PLCs) were piloted with a small group of primary, secondary and special schools in Wales (Harris and Jones, 2010). In early 2010 the PLC model was piloted with all schools in two local authorities and was subsequently extended to all schools in Wales throughout 2010 and 2011. The national model[4] retained three core principles – an absolute focus on improving learner outcomes; purposeful collaboration; professional autonomy, and mutual accountability. The PLC model in Wales is one that reinforces professional collaboration and networking as a main lever for changing what happens in classrooms. It reinforces that PLCs can stimulate and spread innovation about learning and teaching practices, as well as raising collective and individual professional performance. The current PLC work[5] is premised on a number of key principles. First, that system wide change is only possible through collective capacity building generated through professional collaboration and networking. Second, there is a central focus on improving learner outcomes through pedagogical improvement. Third, that action enquiry is a driver for change and development in classroom practice. Theoretically, the national PLC model also draws heavily on the theory of change implicit in Wenger’s (2000) notion of communities of practice. Within such communities practice is developed and refined through the collaboration of “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, 2000).

The basic rationale for the professional learning community work in Wales is that there is a greater possibility for schools to improve learning outcomes through working together to generate innovative and effective practice. Unless professionals are fully engaged in the change process, improving large numbers of schools and classrooms will simply not happen. Although early evidence suggests that professional learning

communities in Wales are securing positive changes in professional practice and learner outcomes, this is not yet uniformly the case. Consequently more work is planned in 2011/2012 to ensure the quality, impact and sustainability of the national PLC programme.

In his work, Fullan (2010a, p. 12) talks about the importance of creating “cultures for learning” which underscores the importance of professionals learning from each other and being collectively committed to improvement. Experience with the pilot phase of PLCs highlighted a number of important considerations about taking professional learning communities to scale. One of the first characteristics cited by Louis and Kruse (1995) of a productive learning community is a willingness to accept feedback and to work toward improvement. In the pilot, there was dedicated time for sharing progress and for gaining critical feedback from those involved in the initial PLC work. This process allowed a general sharing of the issues, challenges, and successes that were being encountered but across all schools but also led to a refinement of the PLC model.

From a range of qualitative and quantitative data collected and analyzed from 106 schools in the pilot phase, it was clear that the most effective PLCs (i.e. those making a difference to learner outcomes) displayed or reflected certain characteristics. Inevitably and predictably, there was initial resistance to PLCs. Many schools and local authorities claimed they were “already doing PLCs” but this view was challenged by the empirical evidence which revealed seven clear features or tests of effective professional learning communities:

Clarity of focus – directly related to improving learner outcomes: consistent use of data to identify the focus and to monitor progress; collaboration of professionals with purpose; capacity building through the engagement and involvement of others; coherent action and change in pedagogical practice; communication of outcomes to other professionals; and change in learner outcomes.

The pilot phase of the PLC work also highlighted that it can be difficult to sustain professional learning communities and that they require certain forms of leadership to be successful. Strong, supportive leadership was found to be necessary to build and sustain professional learning communities within, between and across schools. Heads or principals need to actively build a context for professional learning communities for them to work most effectively. Their support is required to actively distribute leadership among teachers and other professionals, which may include involving teachers who are reluctant to take on leadership roles, and defining autonomy and authority for teacher leaders. It will involve securing the resources to support professional learning and development and also modelling the vision and shared focus of the professional learning communities. Essentially their leadership role is one of establishing a high-trust environment in which it is safe for professionals to lead innovate and change on behalf of the school or groups of schools.

Despite significant progress with the establishment of professional learning communities in Wales, it is fully acknowledged that they offer only one lever for capacity building and system level change, there are clearly others (Andrews, 2011). Also the national PLC programme is still “work in progress” and while there is great enthusiasm from schools and teachers for PLCs plus high degrees of activity, the challenge is to remain focused on the “real work of learning” (Fullan, 2010b) and to deepen the implementation so that PLCs are both strengthened and sustained.

Unsurprisingly, there are some challenges when building this form of collective professional capacity and these challenges will be outlined next.

Challenges

In his State of the Nation speech in 2011, the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, Leighton Andrews stated:

We have built the collective capacity through Professional Learning Communities across Wales. The Professional Learning Communities can offer grounded practical examples of what works to teachers and head teachers as how they source best practice. The implementation of best practice is essential [. . .] we need to move from theory to practice. Professional Learning Communities will be in operation across Wales. We will be far more prescriptive about what those PLCs can focus on. They will not be allowed to be *laizzez faire* in operation. They will have a clear focus on literacy and numeracy and tackling disadvantage (Andrews, 2011, p. 9).

It is clear that PLCs are now viewed as one way of raising standards of literacy and numeracy and tackling disadvantage. This focus on literacy and numeracy is a clear indication that having created an infrastructure for changing professional practice; the system is now expected to deliver. Looking at the experience of the pilot phase and subsequent scaling up of professional learning communities across Wales, some challenges remain. There is no suggestion that professional learning communities are a “silver bullet” for successful system level reform, they are certainly not a panacea. The whole point of a professional learning community is that the “sum is greater than the parts” and that by distributing and sharing leadership more widely, the opportunities for releasing professional learning within schools and across the system is maximised (Harris and Jones, 2010, 2011).

But some significant challenges to the PLC work, remain that could potentially undermine progress and damage the capacity building to date. One of the biggest challenges is the danger of distractions. As Levin (2010, p. 201) notes “keeping focus over time is the single hardest thing to do in managing at any level from a school to a national education system”. As the work in Wales is at a relatively early stage of development, the danger is that the focus will be lost or that attention will drift towards other more exciting or urgent policy developments. The political desire for “quick wins” will inevitably create pressure on the system which could manifest itself in a desire to change direction or to abandon what is already in place. Consequently, the imperative is to maintain focus and direction, to remain resolute in the face of shifting priorities, political needs or new pressures. One way to do this is to accept that distractions will occur and to attempt to understand the perspectives and motivations of those who are supporting them. In addition, some analysis of whether the distractions constitute a “right” or “wrong” lever for change is one way to diminish their potentially negative impact (Fullan, 2011a, b).

Another challenge to the PLC work is that of scaling up without losing quality. The danger in moving PLCs to scale is that their work might become dissipated or diluted and they could lose momentum. The ongoing challenge for PLCs therefore is to focus on removing the barriers to student learning and to ensure that they focus relentlessly on improving learner outcomes. Clearly, there is a tension here between professional empowerment, responsibility and accountability and top down prescription. To ensure that the PLCs focus on the right things, such as improving standards of literacy and numeracy, there will need to be some degree of direction, specification and prescription.

It would be injudicious not to share the best knowledge and practice about the teaching of literacy and numeracy with all PLCs in Wales. Similarly, it would be unthinkable not to draw on the best practices of literacy and numeracy teaching that already exists within, and across schools Wales and to share these more widely. This cannot happen by default, there has to be some way of opening up and sharing the most effective practice.

PLCs operating within, between and across schools provide a natural infrastructure for sharing effective professional practice and trialling, testing and implementing next practice. PLCs can only be effective with the support of other levels within the system, namely the government and local/district level. Their role has to be one of providing the resources, tools and expertise for PLCs to operate effectively at scale while ensuring that there is also sufficient pressure on the PLCs so they remain focused, effective and make a positive difference to learner outcomes and raising standards.

A final challenge is one of gauging the impact and effectiveness of the PLC work. In terms of impact, there are three questions that will help assess the effectiveness of PLCs at the macro level. First, does the PLC work have depth? In other words, is there evidence that the PLCs are making a difference to learner outcomes, where it matters most? If the PLCs are focusing on the right things (i.e. literacy and numeracy) are working together productively; are drawing on the best practice and best evidence; are networking together and have appropriate support and challenge, then improved learner outcomes should follow. Second, does the PLC work have breadth? This refers to the extent to which the PLCs are pushing the boundaries of professional practice by innovating and changing what happens in classrooms. Building collective professional capacity in the system will require new knowledge and changed practice not simply the routine recycling of existing knowledge or old practice.

Third, does the PLC work have length? This relates to the issue of sustainability and how to ensure that the PLC work is not simply viewed as another initiative and quickly jettisoned as more attractive reform models appear on the policy catwalk. High performing education systems, did not improve overnight; there were no quick fixes and no shortcuts. They invested heavily in the hard, unglamorous work of improving teaching and learning and they did this year in and year out, in order to secure their lasting gains in performance. If PLCs are to make a difference in Wales they cannot be short term, they cannot fall into the trap of fad or fashion, they will need to have length, they will need to be sustained if they are to make the gains expected.

Final word

In the search forever improving standards of performance it is clear that collective professional capacity is an important and powerful component in the mix of system reform (McKinsey, 2010; Whelan, 2009; Crowther, 2011). Successful system wide improvement requires a large and sustained effort to improve professional skills; this requires both support and challenge. As Fullan (2010b) notes,

... the power of collective capacity is that enables ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things: for two reasons. One is that knowledge about effective practice becomes more widely available and accessible on a daily basis. The second reason is more powerful still – working together generates commitment. Moral purpose when it stares you in the face through students and your peers working together to make lives and society better, is palpable, indeed virtually irresistible. The collective motivational well seems bottomless. The speed of effective change increases exponentially.

However, it is also clear that only a small minority of systems have activated the power of collective capacity (Fullan, 2010b). Many education systems are still hoping that an accountability system with all its associated paraphernalia of data, measures and prescription will deliver the extent of the improvement required. But unless people know what to do differently and how to do it, no amount of external pressure will work. If you have not seen excellent teaching in your subject area or worked with excellent teachers how do you become an excellent teacher? Improving professional practice necessitates working with colleagues on real issues of teaching and learning that makes a difference to learners. It means having access to the best pedagogical knowledge and practice and continually pushing the expectations and motivation of both teachers and learners. You cannot coerce classroom improvement.

Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) remind us that effective educational change and reform is “not about letting a thousand flowers bloom nor is it about micromanaging everything in detail” (p. 107). In Wales, this is exactly the tension we now face, how to build collective capacity without it being too open ended; how to secure accountability and results without heavy handed prescription; how to generate professional energy, commitment and responsibility while simultaneously applying pressure to the system? In the months ahead, it will be interesting to see how this tension is played out and where energy, resources, and priorities are placed. One thing is clear, a system cannot move without the capacity to do so: it needs the collective will, skill and persistence of all those working at all levels in the system. The evidence about building collective professional capacity is compelling and conclusive; it can deliver the improved performance and outcomes that so many systems, including Wales, are seeking. The real test now is to make it happen.

Notes

1. Available at: <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/dcells/publications/110202teachingmakesadifferenceen.pdf>
2. PISA, www.oecd.pisa.org
3. Following initial development work undertaken in the summer of 2007, a pilot phase of the SEF followed by its full implementation across all schools in Wales.
4. “A Professional Learning Community is created when a group of professionals collaborate and enquire in order to improve learner outcomes. They participate in decision-making; trial and refine new strategies for improvement and are both accountable and responsible for the outcomes of their collective work. The ultimate goal of a PLC can be summed up in three words: improved learner outcomes” (National definition).
5. See almaharris.co.uk – PLCs In Wales page for latest details.

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