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Interview by John Graham

JG: A big question to begin with, and one which is increasingly critical to public education systems across Australia (where public schools have 65% of school enrolments): What do you see as the role of public schools in a democracy?

MF: Funny you should ask. South Australia has just had a Public Education Advisory Committee (2017) headed by Professor Alan Reid. Their report examined the past 150 years and concluded that the education system is based on three principles: compulsory, universal and secular; and six underpinning values: quality, equity, diversity and cohesion, community, democracy, collaboration and trust.

I agree, and would add that a strong public education system must serve the needs of all students, prepare students for life in the 21st century, and be a bedrock of societal cohesion. I know there has been a long debate about Australia's three- part system: government schools, Catholic and independent schools. If these systems do not work together the public good will be undermined.

What we are working on these days is equity and excellence as feeding on each other for the good of all. My advice is keep the spotlight on overall performance and how the three systems fare, work together, and otherwise develop. The performance of government schools is key in this equation.

Collaboration between schools has an important place in furthering school improvement. However, one of the dilemmas which schools face when they work together to develop a collaborative district approach is that the financing of schools is based on a competitive model linked to enrolments. School enrolments are influenced by the right of parents to enrol their children in any public school where there is additional capacity. This tends to develop a hierarchy of schools with a concentration of socially and academically disadvantaged students in some schools. This in turn places real pressure on collaboration. What needs to be done to address this fundamental tension in order to deliver the benefits of collaboration to all schools?

This issue has been a perennial problem in many countries. There are several elements of collaboration and action that I have been engaged in that leads to success. I list them here:

1. As Andy Hargreaves and I have recently argued, 'collaboration and autonomy' are not mutually exclusive. In fact if you stay only autonomous you will not grow. You are better autonomously if you connect, and a better connector if you have a degree of autonomy. See our Professional Capital book, and our report: Bringing the Profession Back In.

2. The overall system has to value and incentivize collaboration—intra school, interschool/network, inter-sector.

3. In all of our experience every time we set up collaborative networks and build transparency and trust, people's experience is positive. There are not actual problems of competition. Andy's finding in the book Uplifting Leadership is that strong organizations 'collaborate to compete'. The better that people are, the more they are inclined to collaborate and benefit from it. So I would say stop whining and get on with it, tolerate or otherwise deal with the odd rogue (getting better at a bad game), and identify and celebrate the advantages. Several of us have written about examples of positive collaboration, not to mention the disadvantages of staying isolated - Andy, David Hopkins, Alma Harris,

Louise Stoll, Steve Munby, Lawrence Ingvarson, and so on. Incidentally, unions and the profession can and should help lead these developments.

You have written about the centrality of "moral purpose" to the principal's role. What are the implications of this for the principal of a public school? How should it be enacted in practice?

The AEU conducted a very large workload survey (13,000 responses) of teachers and principals this year. What clearly emerged from principal respondents was the small proportion of their time (average <20%) they were able to spend on educational leadership. The majority of their time is taken up managing school administration, compliance and accountability requirements.

Yes, moral purpose is central to our work, and we have recently put it into dynamic perspective in our coherence framework book. The four components of the framework are: focusing direction, collaborative cultures, deep learning, and securing accountability (Coherence: The Right Drivers in Action for Schools, Districts and Systems, Fullan and Quinn, 2016, Corwin). And yes, I understand the constraints. I would start with the principal herself/ himself. There are many, many principals currently who find time to lead change. It helps if the system places a priority on it. Further, it is a hell of a lot more satisfying and personally healthy to run a collaborative organization while looking for efficient ways to deal with bureaucracy, and to 'manage' compliance and accountability.

It is not the school leader's job to implement government policy in a literal sense, but rather to exploit it relative to local priorities. Remember Viviane Robinson's major finding: school principals who have the greatest impact on student learning are those who 'participate as learners' with teachers to move the school forward. My book, The Principal (Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2014) spells this out.

Principals indicated in our survey that they would like to change the situation they are in so that they can focus on leading teaching and learning improvement in their school. Do you have any ideas about how this can be done?

Yes, the book I just mentioned lays this out under 'three keys for maximizing impact': lead learner, system player, and change leader. Also their job description needs to highlight 'lead learner'. Principals need to start 'participating as a learner' with teachers and they need to work on changing instructional practice linked to measurable outcomes. This is highly specific (not to say prescriptive) work.

You have described principals as the "lead learner" in schools. Can you explain what you mean by this?

Lead learner is three related things: participate as a learner in working with teachers to move the school forward together; lead and learn in equal measure (you can't lead if you are not learning); and spend your tenure in any school (say for five or six years) developing a collaborative culture to the point where you become dispensable! You don't do the school much good over time if it can't carry on after your departure.

What is the nature of the principal's role in instructional leadership (eg the parameters - where does it begin/where does it end)?

It begins by focusing on instruction as a learner, not as the boss. The more you learn the more influential you become. Your job is to influence the instructional practice of teachers through teachers. It involves trust, non-judgmentalism, transparency, specificity and measurable learning outcomes.

The school improvement relationship between the system, the school and the role of school leaders is complex and constantly under review by one of more of these components.

More and more we are involved in system work. It is a long story so I am going to have to be cryptic. Generally it involves more purposeful action vertically and laterally—up and down and across all levels. Our short version of this is: the top frames; the middle (networks or districts) strengthens, and the bottom (individual schools) gets liberated. Exploit upward, liberate downward would be the tweet. Another aspect of this is 'to go outside to get better inside'. Such a system is more dynamic, and more democratic.

What is the link between school improvement and system improvement?

My response to the previous question captures this. Schools are the system. Improvement must be a joint enterprise: collaboration and autonomy. We are actually working with the California system (from governor to school and vice versa) on this very model where they have combined system direction and local autonomy. Our report will be on my website in late August: Fullan & Rincon-Gallardo: California's Golden Opportunity: Leadership from the Middle.

What do you see as the reciprocal responsibilities of the system and schools in this process?

The system frames goals, provides resources, and ensures that there is a data system re progress and outcomes (but does not micromanage). The schools develop 'internal accountability' (self and collective responsibility), interact with the outside (and with the system itself) to learn. It is a give-and-take proposition.

Principals indicate that system support often ends up as an additional level of bureaucracy rather than as something which builds the capacity of principals to more effectively carry out an educational leadership role. What is an effective way for the system to support school leaders to enable school improvement?

This is a two way street. School leaders have to stop thinking that their role includes compliance - no need to be rebellious, but toeing the line is not a good job description. At the same time they need to increase their 'participation as a learner' activity with teachers. If they do both of these things they will become more empowered and appreciated by teachers and many system leaders alike. System leaders can help create

such a system but it is more effective when it comes from the bottom upward and gets more embraced by system leaders.

There has been evidence from recent selection processes of a marked decline in the number of applicants for principal positions, even in what are regarded as highly desirable and high performing schools. What does the system need to do to attract and retain the best people to fill these leadership roles?

The principalship is actually becoming more important as systems go to what I might call 'coordinated decentralization'. I think we will see the principal's role highlighted both in terms of additional focus on student learning, but also re the development of the profession. What the system needs to do is show how the principal's role and the teaching profession are intertwined and need to develop in concert. In this way the principal's role will grow in stature.

What do school leaders have to do to sustain school improvement?

Focus on a small number of key priorities, and cultivate leadership in others paying simultaneous attention to current performance and building capacity beyond oneself to get what I called above: 'indelible leadership'.

What do you see as the role of professional learning communities in school improvement? Does their effectiveness depend on certain conditions and a particular model of operation?

See Fullan and Hargreaves Bringing the Profession Back In (Learning Forward, 2016). Professional learning communities are superficial failures when they involve getting together without a clear purpose and mechanism for strengthening capacity linked to improved teaching and student learning. Personally I don't use the label professional learning community (being content with the designation 'collaborative cultures'), but if you are going to use it make sure it has the specific components associated with success.

The digital environment has facilitated and elevated the role of data in schools and principals are being encouraged to take a data-driven approach to school improvement. What is your take on how schools and systems should use data?

Big question and we just wrote a book about it: Deep Learning: Engage the World Change the World (Fullan, Quinn and McEachen, Corwin). It is actually a silly question when you think of it. If my goal is to be healthy it would be odd if I said I am not going to look at my health indicators. And if you become a slave to data you really don't have any steering capacity. So, get your moral purpose straight, build purposeful collaboration, improve teaching, focus on the causal pathway to student success, get or produce performance data, monitor how well you are doing, and take corrective action. We have a model to do this and it involves data and digital as 'accelerators' not drivers.

Another big question to finish with: What do you mean when you write that: "Traditional schooling no longer works"? What are the implications of this?

Two reasons: the push reason—traditional schooling is boring for the majority of students (as they go up the grade levels) and teachers. The pull reasons are a) that the digital world is dynamic and alluring, and b) the future of work and global competency requirements are unclear and volatile. With respect to implications, we are involved in working out some solutions with some countries. This involves new learning 'outcomes' –what we call the 6Cs; character, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. And new 'pedagogies': revamping teaching and learning, and altering learning environments.

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