

Rhetoric, Reality and Research: The rhetoric of systemic reform, the reality of leadership development and current trends in school leadership research in the United States

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Abstract: This paper considers a central puzzle of educational reform in the United States: the problem of developing and supporting a strong system of schooling and system-wide leadership at the district level, a unit of organizing equivalent to the former Local Educational Authority in England. In the United States, the problem of developing the system of schooling at this level has come into focus as a result of efforts to enact federal and state policy that aims to bring about dramatic improvements in instructional practice and student learning, particularly in large urban districts. I invoke the four arenas of policy, practice, theory and research to understand the need for theories of organizing and organization around this middle tier and to sketch the broader systems encompassing systems of schooling and systems of research. I apply these four arenas to the analysis of three exemplary recent research and leadership development projects in the United States. The conclusions from this review highlight the paucity of robust theories about organizing and organization at the middle level and the lack of incentive structures that might contribute to expanding foundations of knowledge for the field.

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Introduction

This paper makes an argument for renewed interest in organizing and organization as essential to the forward motion of research in leadership and management of primary and secondary education in the United States. Rather than providing a survey of the field, the paper develops an argument about organizing from consideration of a central puzzle of educational reform in the United States: the problem of developing and supporting a strong system of schooling and system-wide leadership at the district level, a unit of organizing equivalent to the former Local Educational Authority in England. In the United States, the problem of developing the system of schooling at this level has come into focus as a result of efforts to enact federal and state policy that aims to bring about dramatic improvements in instructional practice and student learning, particularly in large urban districts.

The call to pay heed to organizing and organization in compulsory education is not new to the field (Glatter, 2006), but it has renewed relevance in a climate in which the role of the middle layer, between the state and the school, is once again tabled. The argument is made in the context of the three 'R's of rhetoric, reality and research - the rhetoric of policy debates around systems of schooling and reform, the reality of leading school systems and the relevance of contemporary leadership research to these. I invoke the four elements of policy, practice, theory and research as a simple means of sketching the broader systems encompassing systems of schooling and systems of research. I use these elements to sketch a rough comparison between the US and England. I then apply these elements to the analysis of three recent research and leadership development projects in the United States that all attempt to understand and support district-wide efforts to improve teaching and learning. I describe the three as critical cases in that each operates to connect various essential elements of the broader system—not only the system of schooling with its vertical layers enveloping the school (e.g., district, state department of education, federal department of education) but also horizontally across institutions (e.g., academia, school systems, governmental agencies, non-profit foundations).

The conclusions from this review highlight the paucity of robust theories about organizing and organization at the middle level and the lack of incentive structures, particularly funding, that might contribute to expanding foundations of knowledge for the field in this arena.

From Atheoretical-Empiricism to Anti-Empiricism

An article in a prestigious journal of educational research admonished our field for its “atheoretical empiricism” and its “dearth of theory-making,” asserting that, “such theories as do exist have thus far proved unequal to the task of stimulating research”(Getzels, 1952, as quoted in Lagemann, 2000, p. 182). The year was 1952 and the author was Jacob W. Getzels, a founding theoretician of the ‘theory movement’ in educational administration. Getzels wrote in the *Harvard Educational Review* of the need for “theory that will give meaning and order to observations already made and that will specify areas where observations still need to be made.” Ellen Lagemann in an insightful historical account of the development of the field of educational administration research in the United States, writes of how Getzels was part of a larger effort to make behavioural science theory the linchpin in an effort to move away from instrumental principles of management to the systematic analysis of leadership and administrative behaviour (Lagemann, 2000, pp. 179-183). The ‘Theory Movement,’ launched in the 1950s, promised the flourishing of a unified science of administration that would yield competent leaders, effective teachers and high-performing students. The Kellogg Foundation provided funding for its early growth, which included such efforts as the founding of the University Council for Educational Administration and the launch of *Educational Administration Quarterly*, equivalent to the *British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society* and the journal of *Educational Management, Administration and Leadership*.

When Kellogg Foundation interest turned to other areas, the emerging field foundered, its contributions questioned by even Getzels himself. In 1979, an incisive critic of the theory movement, Thomas Greenfield, saw before him a monotonous landscape of “trivial and banal findings” dressed up as “general laws and fundamental insights” in his essay review of U.S. and Canadian research on educational administration (Greenfield, 1979). The promethean effort to unite the field through Grand Theory had faltered. In its place, Andrew Halpin and Andrew Hayes, colleagues of Getzels, bemoaned how “the search for concepts with social concerns” had been displaced by a return to the ‘atheoretical empiricism’ against which Getzels had railed, wrapped in efforts to find “solutions instead of understanding problems”(Lagemann, 2000, p. 182).

These accounts of earlier theory-practice battles are not promising for the prospect of systematic research today. The struggles resonate with the broader contradictions bedeviling educational research that Lagemann identifies in her account, which she describes as a “cautionary tale”. These contradictions include the tensions between theory and application, the conundrum of “professionalized” scholarship and fundamental threats from discipline-driven research. In sum, the challenge remains, as it ever was, one of finding ways for research to be intelligible through improving our understanding of education as well as sensible in its generative contributions to policies and practices that have broad benefit (Lagemann, p. xiii).

In a more recent ‘cautionary tale’ that directly addresses the development of our field, Ronald Heck and Philip Hallinger(2005)describe a landscape for research that offers some, albeit slight, promise. Building on earlier work by Gunter and Ribbins among others in characterizing the status of theory, the 2005 review found hopeful signs of the use of burgeoning conceptual and methodological approaches and greater attention to rigor and reliability (p. 232). Nonetheless, Heck and Hallinger write, “Researchers employing different conceptual and methodological approaches often seem to pass each other blindly in the night. They ask different questions and base their inquiries on widely differing epistemological assumptions” (p. 232). This state of affairs, they claim, has led to much attention being paid to defining problems from multiple perspectives but “too little focus on either description of the problems in practice or on their solution” (p. 239). Their portrayal is of a field endlessly stuck on the spin cycle and unable to move on to ‘rinse and dry’ that would bring substantive debate and discussion about contributions and constraints of various approaches as well as sorting out more and less fruitful approaches to problems and methodological solutions. While no longer the “atheoretical empiricism” of Getzels, Halpin and Hayes, Heck and Hallinger warn of an “anti-empiricism” that finds its validity in topical argument rather than empirical research.

This argument is not particular to our field of research. Glatter(2006)writing of the need for a re-orientation in our field quotes the lament of political scientist David Marquand on the state of scholarship in the social sciences and humanities, areas that to their detriment have tried to emulate the accumulation of knowledge in the natural sciences:

...the academic profession became a secular priesthood, preoccupied by its own, increasingly arcane, internal arguments, all too often expressed in a rebarbative and inaccessible jargon and developed in obscure journals whose editorial practices aped those of the natural sciences. The public culture was impoverished, and the academy cut itself off from the living forces of the outside world. (Marquand, 2004, p. 76, as quoted in Glatter, 2006, p. 76)

This state of affairs, according to Glatter, is particularly exacerbated in fields such as ours that aim not only to build understanding but also to foster improvements in policies and practices. In the UK, Glatter lays the blame for this state of affairs on misguided incentive structures around research, chief among these the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), now Research Excellence Framework (REF) and its emphasis on journal publication rather than quality of contribution, which planning for the next assessment exercise has now begun to put in its sights. Glatter also notes two other contributing factors: the “ever-growing power of the central state” and the “growing involvement of non-academic bodies” (p. 77).

If US scholarship around educational leadership suffers from the same malaise as that in UK, as Heck and Hallinger assert, what misguided incentive structures must animate such dynamics in the absence of the centralizing influence of the state and of the REF? An answer to that question requires attention to the broader system of which scholarship in educational leadership plays its part. A radically simplified sketch of such a system would include the four basic elements of research, theory, policy and practice.

In the next section I draw a high-level comparison between the broader systems, which then leads me to identify the district as a current ‘hotspot’ in the nexus of these elements in the United States. I then examine three critical cases of projects that focus on the district in some way in an effort to discern the incentive structures that guide -or misguide- contemporary educational leadership research.

Current trends in the Broader System: Comparing England and US

The table below is a rough comparison between the US and England in terms of the public sector system of education, comprised of the sense-

making arenas of policy and practice on the one hand and, on the other, the knowledge-building systems of research and theory development that have traditionally been the provenance of academia. The scale of national education in terms of enrolment, budget and infrastructure is vastly different, with all levels of government in the US spending some 10 times the amount spent across England. Even with such difference and scale the comparison can serve as a heuristic to identify those aspects that show greatest difference.

Table 1: Thematic comparison of public sector compulsory education in England and in the United States.

	<i>England</i>	<i>US</i>
<i>Policy</i>	Centralised	Multi-layered
<i>Practice</i>	Consolidation & standardisation	Localised&loosely-coupled
<i>Research</i>	Providers: pluralistic, instrumental, increasingly non-academic Policy: drives (direct) Incentive structures: Some independent sources, but REF and publication rules	Providers: pluralistic Policy: defines (indirect) Incentive structures: academic: publish or perish financial: highly competitive, ideological--foundation, government
<i>Theory</i>	Parallel & disparate	Peripheral & disparate

Key differences include the following:

- In the United States, educational policy is multi-layered, legislated at the federal, state and district levels.
- The multi-layered nature of the policy arena has implications for practice in terms of the diversity of ways policy is recontextualized in practice at both the level of the district and of the schools comprising the district.
- As in England, recent decades have seen a sharp rise in the plurality of providers of research, including non-profit and for-profit entities and a shift away from primary reliance on academic research.

- While the incentive structures for research within academia are similar in both England and the US in terms of expectations for academic output, funding for US research in educational leadership comes mainly through private foundations that have distinct policy agendas. The federal government plays a small but significant role in terms of defining legitimate areas for research.

- Theory development, as noted by Heck and Hallinger, is disparate. In the UK, theory development appears to be more of a central part of the discussion around educational leadership research. In the US, theory development is seen as secondary to the conduct of research that is primarily focused on professional action.

In the decentralized US system, the district has increasingly been seen as the keystone of promoting shifts at scale in terms of accountability to policy mandates and coherence across levels (Fuhrman & Elmore, 2004). The shifts that are seen as essential have to do with what Richard Elmore (1996) terms the 'core of education practice' as:

... how teachers understand the nature of knowledge and the student's role in learning, and how these ideas about knowledge and learning are manifested in teaching and classwork. The "core" also includes structural arrangements of schools, such as the physical layout of classrooms, student grouping practices, teachers' responsibilities for groups of students, and relations among teachers in their work with students, as well as processes for assessing student learning and communicating it to students, teachers, parents, administrators, and other interested parties. (Elmore, 1996, p. 2)

At the policy level most recently, the federal No Child Left Behind act aimed to consolidate systemic alignment to state and federal educational standards by holding district leaders accountable for establishing clear, compelling targets for improvements while spurring efforts across their districts to meet those targets (Knapp, 2008, p. 523). Reviewing such efforts, Knapp outlines tensions that have persisted in locating improvement at the district level:

- ambitious reform goals but limited and uneven capacity for change
- maintaining a singular focus of reform despite many competing agendas which approach change with incommensurate logics
- overlaying new tasks on old structures

- developing grand plans on frail (incoherent or incomplete) theories of action
- addressing unanswered questions with limited information and understanding (Knapp, 2008, p. 524)

A number of recent research projects have attempted to study and support the ways that districts address such tensions in an effort to move instructional reform forward. Below I discuss three such efforts that constitute critical cases along the dimensions of orientation to the object of research, geographical and institutional spread, diversity of funding sources, and types of systemic linkages forged.

Three Projects

Organizational psychologist Karl Weick used the system of schooling in a seminal essay in *Administration Sciences Quarterly* as an archetype to explain his concept of “loosely-coupled systems” (Weick, 1976). Each of the three projects below represents an effort to tighten the coupling of district-led reform of the ‘core of education practice’. Each does so by establishing links that involve bridging within or across the elements described above. The Study of School Leadership focuses on the consolidation of school leadership practice within the district; the study was carried out by establishing links among a consortium of faculty at some of the leading research-focused schools of education at the University of Pennsylvania, Northwestern, University of Michigan, University of Wisconsin-Madison and Vanderbilt University. The study of school reform in San Diego, California, represents an attempt to link practice and research with a focus on learning. Finally, the Executive Leadership Program for Educators at Harvard is not properly a research project in its aim to link practice and policy; however, it serves here as an example of the kind of project viewed as leading in the field of leadership and organization.

*The Study of School Leadership*²

Researchers from the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, comprising the universities noted above, collected data on a professional development program geared towards school leaders in a large urban district in the United States. The study was funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences, one of two so-called "efficacy and replication" studies funded in the Institute's Educational Leadership strand, which has funded only seven studies in this strand from 2004 to the present. The study's aims, according to the IES application, were to evaluate the impact of an initiative known as the National Institute for School Leadership on, "the knowledge and practice of principals, instructional practice in their schools, and student achievement".³

Table 2: Thematic comparison of four arenas for *The Study of School Leadership*

	<i>The Study of School Leadership</i>
Policy	Improvement in student achievement hinges on system-wide capacity
Practice	Developing school leadership through district coordination
Research purpose approach funding	Measure effects of participation of principal professional development on student achievement Multiple-method, randomised-control US Government w/ foundation support
Theory program theory of action conceptual framework	"instructional leadership" with district support fidelity contingent on 'dose' of professional development and 'responsiveness' of participants

²<<http://www.studyofschoolleadership.com/>>

³<<http://ies.ed.gov/funding/grantsearch/details.asp?ID=95>>

In other words, the study intended to establish connections among a professional development intervention at the level of school leader down to specific effects on student learning. Following the mandates of ‘scientific evidence’ put forward by the Department of Education, the study employed a delayed-treatment experimental design, complemented with surveys and qualitative data collection. The study linked effects of principals’ participation on student achievement by examining the performance of third and fourth grade students on standardized tests of reading and mathematics. The logic of the research was that fidelity of program implementation would be contingent on the exposure to professional development conditioned by the ‘responsiveness’ of participants to the professional development, a model predicated on dose-response. Table 2 below summarizes the key points. This is necessarily a simplified summary of a complex research design that trialed several innovative approaches to data collection.

As reported by the Principal Investigator, the purpose of evaluating a particular professional development approach faltered with a change in district leadership and a shift in priorities resulting in “poor implementation and early discontinuation of the program” (Spillane, et al., 2007, p. 3).

San Diego City Schools

Researchers from the University of California, San Diego, the University of San Diego and the University of Pittsburgh collaborated on an intensive, longitudinal study of district-wide instructional reform in the San Diego City School District from two years after the beginning of reform in 1998 until 2004. The study was funded by the unit that preceded the Institute for Education Studies within the Department of Education at a time when funded research included non-experimental design and studies were granted greater scope in their methodological orientations. The project also received private funding from the Spencer Foundation. The research tracked the arrival in San Diego of a series of reforms that had first been carried out on the opposite coast in New York City. The reforms consisted of sweeping implementation of a programme known as “Balanced Literacy” with the aim of bringing improvements at scale to teaching and learning throughout the district by focusing on professional learning for teachers, principals and central office staff. Sociocultural theories of

learning and ethnography provided the conceptual and analytic frameworks for the study. Researchers documented the implementation of reform across all levels of the district—the central office, the work of the central office with school leaders, the work of school leaders with teachers, and teachers work with students in classrooms. Their interest was in tracing both how the central office shaped the actions of district educators and how educators and community came to shape notions of reform at the level of the central office (Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006; Mehan, Hubbard, & Stein, 2005; Stein, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2004). Table 3 summarizes the key points of this project.

Four years after reform was launched in 1998, political and cultural conflicts compounded by technical constraints forced the removal of the champion of the reform in the central office. His departure was called by the authors of the study “the most dramatic single change”, marking a substantial shift in strategy (Hubbard, et al., 2006, p. 215). The volume that resulted from the study, *Reform as Learning*, documents in detail the critical issues surrounding the reform from its beginning to its unravelling.

Table 3: Thematic comparison of four arenas for the study of instructional reform in the San Diego City Schools.

	<i>San Diego City Schools</i>
Policy	maintain competitiveness
Practice	literacy across the curriculum; “reculturing schools”; operational managers to “instructional leaders”
Research purpose approach funding	knowledge-building/practice-building ethnographic; documentation studies US Department of Education and Spencer Foundation
Theory program theory of action conceptual framework	“nested learning communities” expanded opportunities for learning to “reculture the district” Conceptual framework: iterative “Design research” based on sociology of organizations and psychology of learning.

*Executive Leadership Program for Educators (ExEL)*⁴

The ExEL program is a multi-year initiative funded by the Wallace Foundation and draws on earlier research and development at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the Harvard Business School and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. The programme describes its strategy in the following way:⁵

Our strategy is to help public school district and state department of education participants and teams develop and enhance knowledge and skills in instruction, management, and leadership and to use these strengthened capacities to refine their organizational strategies with an explicit focus on the instructional core, increasing organizational coherence, improving leadership and teamwork, and building a sustainable state/district network with the goal of bringing high quality teaching and learning to scale.

ExEL works at three levels: individual, team, and network. ExEL's approach weaves together the four above mentioned high-leverage strands:

•*Teaching and Learning*: Teams develop, articulate, and/or improve their current “point of view” about what good teaching and learning should look like in their district or across their state, keeping a strong focus on the instructional core—the relationship between students and teachers, in the presence of content—and use that point of view to drive decision-making inside and outside the classroom.

•*Systems Development and Organizational Coherence*: Teams increase their capacity to manage human and other resources, systems, culture, structures, and engagement with various stakeholders in a coherent and integrated way, driven by a widely understood and shared improvement strategy.

•*Leadership and Team Development*: Individual and teams identify and improve the leadership and teamwork skills needed throughout their organizations to successfully manage the deep changes this work entails

⁴<http://exel.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do>

⁵<http://exel.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k15649&pageid=icb.page80061>

and to establish collaborative norms that focus all adult interactions on the work of instructional improvement.

•*State/Local Networks*: Teams engage in a state/local educational improvement network to share instructional improvement practices, improve strategic alignment between the state agency and the districts, and sustain and spread the work.

Table 4. summarizes ExEL.

Table 4. Thematic comparison of four arenas for the ExEL programme.

	<i>Executive Leadership Program for Educators</i>
Policy	bring high-quality teaching and learning to scale
Practice	build state/district networks through horizontal and vertical leadership and team development
Research purpose approach funding	shift policy through the development of innovative leadership and systemic collaboration evaluation; documentation; advocacy Wallace Foundation
Theory program theory of action conceptual framework	coherence framework”, systems development and organisational development none

Since 2006, ExEL has supported the creation of state/local networks in Kentucky, Ohio, Massachusetts and Oregon. The funder of the initiative, the Wallace Foundation, is specifically interested in innovative professional development around the notion of “alignment” of state policy, district coordination and school enactment.

Discussion

The focus on leadership development and the instructional core has had a profound and deserved influence on the field, especially in drawing attention to the district level. This has endured and led to many exemplary

efforts to bring about alignment, a coherent vision of the ends of education and the means necessary to arrive at those ends. At the same time, attention to leadership development appears to have over-emphasized agency and underemphasized complexity of the structure through which that agency is exerted.

This is due in part to the failure of theory—that is, the articulation of theories that can inform research, influence policy and strengthen practice. The Study of School Leadership in its initial aim to evaluate a leadership development bore marks of what Lather (2008, p. 363) labels “window dressing” and “enlistment in the civil service of knowledge production for the state”. The San Diego study provides some hope that knowledge of system processes and dynamics might accumulate and lessons for both practice and policy might be learned. However, it also offers a cautionary tale in that funding such an initiative in the current climate is impossible absent a dramatic shift in the Department of Education’s views of research. ExEL also provides some hope in its attention to systems and interaction. Yet, its sponsor, the Wallace Foundation, appears to have little interest in theorizing about systems and is more intent on promulgating best practice in the field of leadership development.

A focus on leadership and the instructional core for all its best intentions nonetheless distils the system of schooling to an essence that neglects the contradictory forces that are inherent in organizational practice in the interest of coherence. Examples of this are the unintended (to the reform) but enriched (to the research) outcomes that accompanied the San Diego reform and the unintended (to the reform) but fatal (to the research) results that accompanied the School Leadership Study. Glatter emphasizes that, “it is important that the connection between leadership and organization is firmly established analytically” if we are not to be “in danger of continuing to be trapped within the ideology of the ‘can-do’ culture ... whereby agency is always considered capable of overcoming structure” (Glatter, 2006, p. 73). The study of school reform in San Diego bears witness to the notion that attention to systemic issues at the middle level of the district is more likely to unravel the complexity of countervailing forces than would attention to leadership on its own.

Conclusions

Returning to our 3Rs the selected studies reveal that the rhetoric of coherence is ascendant, but from a leadership angle that continues to convey a sense of ‘can-do’ culture. The reality of leadership within systems of schooling demands more robust theory about organizing and organization that captures the complex, multi-faceted and contingent facets of leading and following in systems of schooling. The lack of funding as an incentive structure, either from the federal government or foundations, appears to circumscribe research in ways that do not readily lead to the accumulation of knowledge around organizing and organization in schooling.

Robust discussion and debate about theories of organizing and organization are just as necessary in the UK right now as they are in the US. Not to be unduly deterred by ‘cautionary tales’, we might begin with consideration of and debate around those approaches that have had some success in gaining a purchase on the broader system in the interest of sensible practice and policy and intelligible research and theory. If the Kellogg Foundation or another generous philanthropist wanted to step up and fund such debates along with existence proofs in empirical research, as it did in Getzels era, the support would be welcomed. Experience of the past half-century teaches us to be more modest in our aspirations of a unified and unifying theory while at the same time being more ambitious in our engagement with “good enough” (Luttrell, 2000) theories that productively engage policy and practice while building sure foundations for the accumulation of knowledge.

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