

Chapter 12

Concluding Comments and Looking Ahead



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Abstract This chapter provides concluding reflections and implications for future work in school development amidst global trends toward evidence-based practice, tensions between centralization of curriculum and evaluation policy and the needs of particular, and increasingly diverse communities, schools, and students. We see the globalization of evidence-based school development policies and university-community partnerships, the use of generalizable models developed from experimental design, and increasingly diverse demographics in schools. Thus, we have argued that context matters; evidence does not necessarily mean that a model developed from an experimental design is appropriate for a problem of practice in particular school settings. At the same time, school and district leaders benefit from dialogue within levels and beyond as they work toward improvement in order to navigate the Zone of Uncertainty in their particular school and community context and in relation to particular problems of practice affecting schools in other communities, other states, or even other nation states.

Keywords Multi-level school development · Context · Process · International dialogue

This chapter provides concluding reflections and implications for future work in school development amidst global trends toward evidence-based practice, tensions between centralization of curriculum and evaluation policy and the needs of particular and increasingly diverse communities, schools, and students. We can observe global borrowing and lending (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006) of evidence-based school development policies and university-community partnerships, the use of

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generalizable models developed from experimental design, and increasingly diverse demographics in schools. Thus, as we review in Chap. 1, many scholars and educators have argued that context matters; evidence does not necessarily mean that a model developed from an experimental design is appropriate for a problem of practice in particular school settings. At the same time, school and district leaders benefit from dialogue within levels and beyond as part of a network of improvement (Bryk et al., 2015) in order to navigate the zone of uncertainty in their particular school and community context and in relation to particular problems of practice affecting schools in other communities, other states, or even other nation states.

In this volume, then, we propose school development amidst what we call the zone of uncertainty, including an evolution of policies aimed at school development or improvement and equity as well as changing demographics. Chapters in this volume review popular approaches to school development designed to provide evidence-based generalizable models aimed at measurable and sustainable improvements as well as recent critiques about the exclusive use of such approaches in all school contexts and for all problems. Critiques of these models also feature reliance on organizational systems change and improvement without explicit attention to education traditions and values or the broader culture and needs of communities (e.g. health, poverty) and the needs of increasingly diverse students within communities. Moreover, critiques feature the lack of attention to schools or even districts in relation to states, nation states, and the globe. The approach featured in the Arizona process as well as in school development processes in Sweden, Germany, Australia and another U.S. state, South Carolina, extends the literature on school improvement models with explicit attention to the cultural, historical, and policy context and to multi-levels of development needed for sustainable, long-term change. More specifically, we propose that school development is a multi-level process grounded in education and sensitive to the cultural and historical situation as well as the needs of the contemporary situation in particular schools, districts, states, nation states, and communities within them.

We describe in detail a school development project whereby university faculty partnered with the state (ABOR) and districts to provide professional development for leadership teams in persistently underperforming Arizona schools. The Arizona project served over 70 persistently underperforming schools over a five-year period. Essentially, the model was designed to build team leadership capacity for sustainable school development in schools that were persistently underperforming but not yet designated for turnaround status. Importantly, the project was developed across the state of Arizona in relation to state-administered curriculum and evaluation policies as these state policies related to national policies and global trends toward curriculum and evaluation centralization (e.g. Common Core and related externalized evaluation policy pressures). Prior to our initial application of school development in the Arizona Institute for Leadership Development and Research (AZiLDR), we had conducted research on principals in successful schools as part of the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) and related leadership studies. The ISSPP is a network of researchers from 27 different countries, including Sweden, Australia, and the United States. In addition, as the project evolved in relation to our

own findings, we drew upon literature on leadership capacity (Bennett, 2012; Mitchell & Sackney, 2009) and culturally responsive leadership (e.g. Johnson, 2007; Scanlan & López, 2014) as well as theories guiding education amidst changing demographics (Dewey, 1887, 1916; Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017). Further, the project was grounded in a research-based delivery system (Desimone, 2009) and evaluation results and lessons from our work over a five-year period. Over time, results were positive and indicated the need for attention to process and use of common elements (i.e. the school culture, leadership capacity, curriculum and pedagogical traditions, evidence as a source of reflection, and culturally responsive practices) in relation to particular problems of practice more than an aim toward the development of a generalizable model.

Results of the Arizona project were analyzed using quantitative (a pre- and post-survey measuring leadership and school capacity; school letter grades based on student outcomes) and qualitative (interviews and observations) methods. Research results and lessons from that project implementation indicated the importance of key elements in the school development process, including values and culture, leadership capacity, direction and goals, use of data for reflection and feedback, curriculum and pedagogical activity, and strengths-based approaches for diverse populations. Each element required attention to communication with levels beyond the school, including particularly the district and state department of education officials. Moreover, each element required a readiness for change and a culture of trust and positive relationships as well as explicit attention to the other elements. With the ultimate goal of diffusing the learning throughout the school as part of a microcosm of democratic education within individual schools, this was imperative. The district representative was chosen in consultation with the superintendent; this individual was an integral part of the school team, offering insight and buffering them from competing district initiatives that could derail their progress. Additionally, regional coaches provided expertise to school teams, participating in all phases of the project. State representatives were also included in order to facilitate leadership team teaching or pedagogical activity and mediation with district and state policy. In other words, the elements and processes were designed to work together to support leadership capacity for education in continuous school development. Chapters in Part II further describe these elements, applications, and lessons from case studies.

In Part III, chapters feature school development in another U.S. state of South Carolina as well as contributions from Sweden, Australia, and Germany, especially focusing on the policies, underlying conceptions of education and leadership, and pointing at the need for a long-term, community-based approach with a common language to communicate about school development within and between levels (district or municipality, state, nation state and increasingly transnationally). Lessons from the Arizona project along with learning from the Carnegie ILead network informed school development projects in South Carolina; however, the South Carolina project was also developed for the particular and somewhat different cultural and historical context of schools in that state. In South Carolina, many schools are situated in rural areas and serve many students whose families are part of an historical legacy of slavery and black-white racism as well as subsequent civil rights

movements and more recent demographic shifts to include refugees and a growing number of LatinX from internal demographic shifts. Rural schools with increasingly diverse students also suffer from reduced state and local tax base funding (the so-called I-95 Corridor of Shame). In the South Carolina school development chapter (Moyi, Hardie & Cunningham, this volume), we see a South Carolina school development project from the same nation state (USA) informed by a common leadership research base as well as practical lessons from the Arizona project and yet contextualized for particular state policies, culture, and needs of schools and students.

Similarly, in Australia, Gurr, Acquaro, and Drysdale (this volume) provide several examples of distinct evidence-based school development at multi-levels (national, state, local school) amidst the complex and changing context of policies, an increasing scrutiny of testing, and demographic shifts. The first example features national school-wide improvement initiatives and two programs are described. IDEAS (Innovative Designs for Enhancing Achievements in Schools), is an extensive and on-going school improvement project that has developed a framework for establishing professional learning communities to improve school literacy outcomes. The second example explores the state level through considering work at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education in terms of evidence-based teacher training through the development of a clinical teaching model, and evidence-based school improvement through the Science of Learning Schools Partnership Initiative which utilizes a cycle of inquiry approach to develop an important learning focus. Finally, the Australian chapter provides an example of two government schools in challenging circumstances that have developed their own individual school improvement strategy based on several sources including evidence-based research, school data and effective decision-making processes. Here we see positive results from both the centrally developed model and the bottom-up, school-developed approaches, with both improvement processes explicitly responsive to the contexts of schools and surrounding communities as well as the demands of policies. Although specific terminology varies among the centralized and school-based approaches, the potential for broad-based school development is evident. Moreover, as Gurr et al. (this volume) clearly illustrate, for school autonomy to make a difference for students, professional autonomy and strong leadership is required.

In Sweden, school development is initiated at the national level with policy documents and inspection reports as well as university support in dialogue at that level. However, as Johansson and Ärlestig (this volume) also point out, despite a system of inspections and a clear national policy, there is often a lack of a common language for articulating problems and theories of actions, and for describing school processes and change (Lindensjö & Lundgern, 2000). Johansson and Ärlestig examine a hierarchical chain from the government through their agencies down to the local municipalities and the school district and the schools, questioning the extent to which this chain of communication is characterized by authority or trust. Moreover, there is a lack of coherent language across and between levels, and this lack of coherence affects the ways in which leaders at different levels (national to school) approach the problem. Likewise, school development approaches in other contexts

note similar challenges and the need for a common language of communication, one that features a language of education.

Germany is experiencing similar policy trends toward evidence-based school development as well as demographic shifts due to a recent influx of refugees and other global population migrations. In recent years, Germany has implemented externalized evaluation policies and borrowed from turnaround models from the U.S. and the U.K. In this chapter, Huber and Skedsmo (this volume) report on research findings from a school development project in a large city in Germany over a five-year period. In this project, school turnaround is defined more broadly to include local and central authorities in order that the school's stakeholders would provide contextual knowledge and ownership for school improvement efforts. Results from the project were promising in terms of improved student outcomes, the importance of leadership, time for sustained effort, and a school development coach but also point toward the need for an adaptive approach that is more aligned with the country's educational traditions and governance context.

Drawing on findings from all school development work in this volume, we argue two points: (1) school development must be considered as a multi-level education and mediational process, one that would benefit from coherent mechanisms for reflection and communication within and between levels around key elements (e.g. leadership capacity, autonomy, culture, education traditions, including curriculum and pedagogical activity, use of data or evidence, culturally responsive practices) and evaluations (qualitative data as in policy and inspection reports/document analysis as well as quantitative data from student testing) from schools and districts or municipalities to states (if appropriate), national levels and increasingly at transnational levels; and (2) school development must be considered as a contextual process, one that is explicitly sensitive to the culture and needs of students as well as to the time and support necessary for improvements to be developed and sustained. We see this volume as a beginning attempt toward a multi-level, contextually based school development process, one that features a cross-national dialogue for exchange and support.

To begin, the review and comparison of school development approaches and examples in various national and local contexts helps us to better see connections among global trends, national policies, state policies, district policies and school approaches as well as the need for contextually-based and educationally relevant work on problems of practice. Like Australia, Germany, and the U.S., the Swedish chapter criticizes traditional top-down policy requirements for school development that promote the use of evidence-based models tested with randomized controlled trials or experiments and that assume the same capacity for implementation at lower levels and the same contextual problems of practice. A research-based mechanism, coherent language and structure for pedagogical activity, and coherent language for other communication about the school development processes among university, policy, and practitioner levels may serve as a point of departure to understand school development amidst the contemporary situation. Further, this common language for school development and evaluation thereof may support efforts toward comparative research on how school development and educational leadership is implemented

between policy documents and leadership at different levels and in different cultural and historical contexts.

This volume features university faculty working in partnership with educational leaders on problems of practice, developing culturally relevant solutions to particular problems. Some of these solutions actually utilize externally developed solutions to educational problems of practice but contextualize them to fit particular situations and the needs of students. In other instances, solutions are developed on-site from the ground up. While these school development processes vary to a degree across national contexts, all of these processes include some attention to elements like school culture, leadership capacity and cooperation, curriculum work, pedagogical leadership and effectiveness in classrooms, use of data or evidence as a source of reflection, and cultural sensitivity and responsiveness.

Going forward, we plan to draw on the strengths of the different approaches in Sweden, Australia, Germany, the US, and perhaps elsewhere to develop a contextually sensitive school development process, including a structure for mediation and communication with a common language about school development that extends beyond the school level to include districts, policy leaders (state and national) as well as translational organizations. In all of the chapters, communication between schools and districts supports coherence but does not always leave room for exploration of alternative ways to approach the same problem of practice. Further, school development work and communication between schools and districts does not necessarily extend to policy levels nor do policy language and expectations necessarily reach schools and districts/municipalities. Development with national policy leaders is more explicit in the Swedish case and with state and national policy leaders in the case of Australia, Germany, and the U.S. In other words, we see an advantage to combine the strengths of communication and school development processes and elements across all of the cases to develop a culturally sensitive and multi-level approach to school development.

We also see opportunities for cross-national research and leadership development as well as cross-institutional courses or programs that give explicit attention to education traditions and interculturality. With technology and existing international co-operations (e.g. ISSPP, ISLDN), there will be opportunities to work across institutional and national boundaries in ways that may benefit increasingly pluralistic student needs within these and other national states. Other scholars have provided a foundation for understanding mutual influences among levels from schools to various policy levels, including Louis et al.'s (2010) project funded by the Wallace Foundation on leadership influences on student learning whereby school leadership, from formal and informal sources, helps to shape school conditions (including goals, culture, and structures) and classroom conditions (including curriculum, the size of classrooms, and the pedagogy used by teachers). Here many factors within and outside schools and classrooms help to shape teachers' sense of professional community. School and classroom conditions, teachers' professional communities, and student/family background conditions are directly responsible for the learning of students. Drawing on another stream of literature, we support a strengths-based approach to education as essential for successful school development in culturally

diverse schools, communities, and nation states. As noted in Chap. 6 and throughout the chapters from Sweden, Australia and Germany, education in school development lies in the pedagogical relations and provocations into the self-realizations and growth of increasingly diverse young people. Thus, we consider Moll et al.'s (2006) research on teachers' connections with children's cultural background strengths or funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 2006) and leadership scholars' (e.g., Johnson, 2006; Scanlan & López, 2014) applications of culturally responsive pedagogy and *funds of knowledge* to leadership practice. Johnson (2006) define culturally responsive leadership as leadership that involves philosophies, practices, and policies that create inclusive schooling environments for students and families from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds. Scanlan and López draw on culturally responsive leadership practices that reduce marginalization and successfully educate what they term the new mainstream of students.

The school development processes in this volume extend and contribute lessons and examples beyond the mainstream turnaround literature from the U.S. and the U.K. Findings and lessons from the featured school development efforts in Germany, Australia, Sweden and the U.S. may support the development of a new international dialogue with a common, coherent, and intercultural language around *how* leadership capacity for education and school development can be supported and sustained within and between all levels that must be open to new uncertainties.

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