National College
for School Leadership

A self-improving school system in international context

David H Hargreaves, January 2012

Resource

Contents

The cause–effect relationship between teaching strategies, educational league tables and national economic performance is far from proven, yet the need for informed international comparison is now inescapable... If making sense (rather than, say, transplanting policies) is one's principal goal...then culture and history have to be the basic frames within which one's attempts to understand and explain are set... no educational policy can be properly understood except by reference to the web of inherited ideas and values, habits and customs, institutions and world views which make one country... distinct from another.

Robin Alexander, 2000:2–5

Our zeitgeist is a new (and ancient) awareness that we participate in a world of exquisite interconnectedness. We are learning to see systems rather than isolated parts and players. Under the austere title of *systems thinking*... we are discovering many things worthy of wonder. We can now see the webs of interconnections that weave the world together; we are more aware that we live in relationship, connected to everything else; we are learning that profoundly different processes explain how living systems emerge and change.

Margaret J Wheatley, 1999:158

Introduction

This is the third in a series of thinkpieces on a self-improving school system. The contention of the first thinkpiece, *Creating a self-improving school system* (Hargreaves, July 2010), was that inter-school partnerships (clusters, alliances, families) are the new organisational form on which a self-improving system has to be based. The second, *Leading a self-improving school system* (Hargreaves, September 2011), provided a preliminary version of a maturity model of a partnership between two or more schools, with particular reference to newly established teaching schools and their strategic alliances. In both thinkpieces a particular focus was on the lessons that educators might learn from partnerships and alliances in the business world.

To recap, the maturity model consists of three dimensions, each with four strands.

The **professional development** dimension and its strands:

— joint practice development

— talent identification and development through distributed leadership

— mentoring and coaching

— distributed staff information

The **partnership competence** dimension and its strands:

— high social capital

— fit governance

— evaluation and challenge

— distributed system leadership

The **collaborative capital dimension** and its strands:

— analytical investigation

— creative entrepreneurship

— alliance architecture

— disciplined innovation

Two important issues about the maturity model remain unattended:

1. Some of the 12 strands may be more important than others: they may not all have the same weight in the forging of successful partnerships.

2. The strands connect with one another, but the maturity model in the previous thinkpiece is set out in a linear way for ease of presentation, and does not explore these interconnections in much detail.

The more important of these two issues is, I believe, the first – the relative importance of the strands. The second issue then becomes relevant: how the more important strands relate to the others. Clarification of these issues is essential if we are to understand what makes partnerships between schools successful and helps them thrive and evolve into a self-improving school system.

Everything in the maturity model is based on what I have observed in school partnerships, some of which seem very successful. Can the school leaders involved explain exactly how and why they are being successful? No, not as fully as is needed. The McKinsey report (Mourshed, Chijioke & Barber, 2010) on the world's most improved school systems notes that:

> few [of the leaders of improving school systems] were certain about why they had been successful: they often did not have a 'theory of the case' about why what they did worked. Even fewer had a mental map of how all the changes they made fit together as a coherent whole. Some even thought they had just been lucky.

<div align="right">Mourshed, Chijioke & Barber, 2010:11</div>

If partnerships and alliances are to be successfully developed in England in a relatively short timescale, then a compelling and coherent '**theory of the case**' of partnership development is needed. These thinkpieces are my conjectures, based on observation and conversations with those involved in successful partnerships , about what makes them work.

To co-create a better maturity model, the National College is working with some of the first cohort of teaching schools to refine these conjectures by subjecting them to criticism and test. The goal is to improve our theory of the case of what makes partnerships and alliances work. Some schools are using the maturity model as an audit tool, but there is a danger that the model is thereby reduced to a tick-box list. Alongside its use for audit purposes, the model should provoke thinking about the nature of partnership and the theory of the case behind it – what one is doing for what reasons. In my experience, school leaders may develop a distinctive theory of the case to fit their circumstances, deciding that one strand is indeed more important than the others and making links between different strands as part of their partnership strategy. For every partnership to formulate its distinctive theory of the case is to create a compelling and coherent account that can inform, persuade and inspire all parties in the partnership. It also helps the pioneers of inter-school partnerships to codify the knowledge of how to be an effective **architect of alliances**, one of the strands of collaborative capital, the third dimension of the maturity model.

This third thinkpiece, then, consists of some further conjectures. In it I argue that one strand is indeed more important than the others and that the achievement of this master strand is especially challenging. I suggest that the master strand is linked to other strands in powerful ways, and that the interactions and mutually reinforcing relations between the master strand and its associated strands are at the heart of a self-improving school system.

This is a thinkpiece, so from time to time the narrative will be punctuated by some questions that all involved in inter-school partnerships and/or using the maturity model might consider. Readers may do so whilst reading the text, or incorporate them in the agenda for a professional discussion group.

> Do you think one of the strands is more important than the others? If so, which one? What leads you to this conclusion? How do you think it relates to the other strands? What are the practical implications of your ideas for your partnership strategy?

As we shall see, my own argument takes us on an unusual journey, far from the immediate day-to-day demands of establishing and maintaining partnerships between schools. Sometimes a detour from the main developmental road of the maturity model is necessary if one is to examine that road from a wider and longer perspective. Standing back for a moment can be a source of the deep inspiration and practical guidance needed to support the hard slog on the path to maturity.

The journey begins by setting inter-school partnerships in a broader **international context**, from which it has for some years been fashionable for politicians and policymakers to seek any lessons that might be learned to improve their own school system.

As in the previous thinkpieces, some account will also be taken of what might be learned from businesses in that context.

The international context

Borrowing policies and practices from other countries is a field called **policy transfer**, a process that has a close parallel when school leaders look to other schools and their leaders as a source of ideas for school improvement. There are obvious questions. From whom should one borrow, and on what grounds? Is it easier to borrow some things rather than others? Are some types of policy transfer more successful than others? It is known why and how politicians and policymakers tend to play the game of policy transfer:

> Before policy transfer can occur, policy makers must first define a condition as a public problem... One of the most common causes of this is when actors within one policy-making system perceive their system as falling behind its primary competitors.
>
> Dolowitz, 2000:14

> Political parties are constantly engaging in policy transfer because they need new ideas and policies to increase their electoral appeal or appease party activists. Within the process of policy transfer, parties tend to use lessons selectively to either defend or forward ideas and policies which advance their ideological beliefs and electoral chances.
>
> Dolowitz, 1998:17

This certainly seems to apply to attempts at policy transfer in education in England by both main political parties. Take, for instance, selective secondary education. The political right can cite evidence of it as a contributor to success (Hungary), and the political left can make as good a case for a non-selective system (Finland). As the evident purpose of policy transfer is to help to promote and implement one's own policies, a pick 'n' mix approach to borrowing is politically attractive.

What exactly is it that one borrows from another country? For political scientists the answer is obvious: policies. What is a policy? In this context, it refers to a plan or direction taken by government (central or local), to change the structures, rules, regulations, routines and procedures in ways that are intended to shape the behaviour of those who implement, and are affected by, that policy. A policy's purpose is to influence what people do. From a sociological perspective, people's **practices** (what they do) normally arise from their **values** (what they believe and hold dear), and values have yet deeper roots in **cultures**, whether major national cultures or various sub-cultures, such as regional, occupational, age related and so on. Needless to say, the relationships between practices, values and cultures are exceedingly complex.

New policies typically, though sometimes indirectly, demand changes in what the target people do, their practices. An authority, especially government authority, can mandate people's practices, but it cannot mandate values and cultures. Indeed, when people are forced to change their practices, they tend, to the irritation of policymakers, to cling to their values and cultures, so that as soon as they are free to abandon the mandated practices, their values and cultures are overtly restored, even rejuvenated.

There are four main strategies for policy transfer:

1. Replicate the policy or copy it as faithfully as possible: for preference, replicate a practice and ignore issues of values and culture.

    This reduces the risk of mangling the policy in the process of transfer. At the same time, it assumes that there are no contextual differences that matter.

2. Adapt the policy to fit particular conditions in the new context.

    The need to adapt to the different context is acknowledged, but there is a risk that the process of adaptation will damage the policy:

When policies and programmes are borrowed, policy makers tend to adapt them to their own social, cultural and institutional setting. While this might seem like the rational choice, this process of adaptation often leads to a different pattern of implementation and policy development, and thus to a set of problems not encountered in the originating country.

Dolowitz, 2000:6

3. Graft the policy onto some local policies to ease the transfer.

   Again, the borrowed policy maybe spoilt through its interactions with the local policies with which it is spliced, though the risk is lower than with 2 above.

4. Redesign the policy: achieve the same end by different means.

   This requires considerable imagination: getting clarity about the ends of the policy and redesigning the means to achieve them in a very different setting. It is not strictly a form of policy transfer, but rather an attempt to transfer the purposes or principles behind an admired policy in another country.

The first two are particularly attractive to politicians. The practice driven by the policy looks as if it can easily be implemented and monitored, and it can apparently be combined with a pick 'n' mix approach of selective borrowing from different countries. Politically, the fourth is the least attractive, because of the sheer work, both intellectual and practical, that is necessarily involved. Such difficulties may, however, be the price one pays for the most effective transfer. In this thinkpiece I shall argue that a self-improving school system based on partnerships and alliances has much to gain from this fourth option.

Currently, the country of choice for borrowing education policy is Finland. There is an obvious reason: the very high performance level of Finland in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests and in other international league tables of student achievement. (I leave on one side the issue of the validity and reliability of the PISA tests and the representativeness of the samples.) A close look at the top performers (Table 1) reveals something interesting.

Some countries that cluster at the head of the table have a geographical feature in common: East Asia. Shanghai is clearly top of the league, but its performance is similar to that of its neighbours. This raises the obvious question, which has been asked for many years: what do these countries have in common to perform so well? The UK does not do as well as expected, and is much closer to the USA, which has comparable Anglo-Saxon features, than to East Asia[1].

Table 1: Performance of 15 year olds in PISA 2009 by rank order

Country	Reading	Maths	Science
Shanghai	1	1	1
Singapore	5	2	4
Hong Kong	4	3	3
South Korea	2	4	6
Japan	8	9	5
Finland	3	6	2
USA	17	31	23
UK	25	28	16

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1   Australia is now getting closer to East Asian performance, which may reflect the substantial immigration from East Asia in recent years.

Finland does well, undoubtedly, but in terms of its neighbours – other Scandinavian or European neighbours – it is an outlier (Frederiksson, 2006). The obvious question here is what is so distinctive about Finland that makes it deviant among its neighbours in terms of student achievement. Indeed, the Finns themselves are surprised by their success, asked that very question, and reported that:

> the outstanding success of Finnish students in PISA has been a great joy but at the same time a somewhat puzzling experience to all those responsible for, and making decisions about, education in Finland.

<div align="right">Valijarvi et al, 2000:3</div>

Their considered conclusion recognises the complexities of the relationships between possible causal factors, which are:

> attributable to a web of interrelated factors having to do with a comprehensive pedagogy, students' own interests and leisure activities, the structure of the education system, teacher education, school practices, and, in the end, Finnish culture.

<div align="right">ibid:4</div>

This is, of course, a confession of ignorance, but it has not prevented many countries from borrowing selectively from Finland to boost their levels of student achievement, and it is true that there is no hard evidence that such borrowing will not work. But the borrowing is usually highly selective. In England politicians have taken to the idea that all teachers should have a Master's, but quietly ignore, for example, the fact that the Finns do not have a national curriculum, that formal schooling starts at age seven, and that there are no compulsory tests or examinations until higher secondary school. Little attention is paid to the last two words in the above quotation – Finnish culture.

This selective pick 'n' mix approach has another weakness: it assumes some kind of direct link between the borrowed practice and specific outcomes, such as student test results. In reality it is always exceptionally difficult to be sure which education policies cause which outcomes, particularly improved student test performance. It may well be that the complex interactions between policies are what produces the desired outcomes, and wrenching one particular policy from its integrated context may destroy powers optimistically attributed to it.

My immediate interest, however, is in why East Asian countries do so consistently well, for it is this very consistency that may make it easier to identify what underlies their success than is possible in the unique and puzzling case of deviant Finland, with its idiosyncratic history: fighting for its language and identity as a nation after it gained independence in 1917, and constantly in the shadow of its Russian and Swedish neighbours[2].

> What do you think might explain the consistently high performance of East Asian countries in PISA tests? Are there policies we might usefully borrow from them? Would such policy transfer be easy in your view?

Today there is a second argument for looking at Asia. One has to ask where most of the world's young people are located, those against whom the young people in our own schools will be competing as they join the workforce over the next 20 years (Table 2).

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2   It is important to recognise that there are some general lessons that the UK might learn from Scandinavia as a whole. See especially Wilkinson & Pickett (2009).

Table 2: Where are the world's under 25 year olds (millions)?

Country	Number	% of population
India	593	52
China	502	38
USA	105	35
UK	19	31
Finland	1.5	29

China and India already have over a billion young people: the USA looks small by comparison. The UK is a minor player in world population statistics, and our young people will compete with their peers in China and India, not Finland. Moreover – and this is not unconnected with population size – China is moving rapidly to becoming the world's leading economy, and is expanding its education system to match its economic ambitions. It is harder to get into university in China than it is in England, simply because the Chinese cannot expand their higher education system fast enough.

So why are we not paying more attention to China, when Shanghai, the undisputed top of the PISA league table, is the place that now embodies the country that China aspires to become? The answer, I think, lies in the tendency, perhaps at an unconscious level, to look for some kind of cultural compatibility with a country from which one wants to borrow:

> Closely associated with political ideologies are societal values, or cultural proximity... If the prevailing values of a society are so dissimilar the possibilities of transfer are severely restricted... Transfer is facilitated by an extensive degree of cultural proximity.

Dolowitz, 1998:31

The Finns seem relatively close to us culturally as well as geographically, and though their language is difficult for us to master, they themselves speak impressively fluent English. The Chinese, by contrast, seem very different from us in cultural and linguistic terms, as well as geographically distant. On this argument, policy transfer from Finland might have a better chance of success than from China. In fact, however, the Finns interpret their success in terms of their distinctive culture:

> Education has also been an integral part of the Finnish national education programmes aiming at cultural development. In a small and remote country with a strange language, the provision of education for all has been conceived as a necessary means for keeping the nation's culture dynamic. A small country, it has been thought, cannot afford to leave anyone outside high quality education. This became especially evident during the recession years of the 1990s, which greatly strengthened faith in the significance of education, not least as concerns employment opportunities and economic success.

Valijarvi *et al*, 2000:40

> If a country's culture is part of the explanation of high achievement in PISA tests, and this applies to countries with very different cultures, such as Finland and East Asia, is there an implication about England's culture and its impact on schooling?

There is a third reason for taking China seriously. This is its performance in business, which has flourished at an astonishing pace following the reforms instituted by Deng Xiaoping after the death of Mao Zedong, reforms that have now paved the way to a version of capitalism with a distinctive Chinese flavour. Is there a link between success in education and in business? If so, it is unlikely to be in terms of the practices adopted in business and education, for the two are very different worlds in which there are surely very different professional practices. What teachers can learn from business practices for application in their classrooms, and vice-versa, must be of limited scope. What the worlds of business and education might have in common is more likely to be found in values and/or culture.

The cultural base of best practice in business and in education

Some years ago Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars (1993) set out to explore the nature of wealth creation in different nations, defining who did what well and why. It began as a search for best practices. This would mean option 1 or 2 in the types of policy transfer described above, namely replicate or slightly modify the best practice to make it work in your own country. But they soon decided that this approach was a misguided dead-end. Instead, they concluded that wealth creation is, in essence, a moral act. It is driven by the broader values that underlie specific practices. In this, they recalled the work of the sociologist Max Weber and his famous contention that the Protestant ethic played a key role in the rise of capitalism in Europe. What values today drive wealth creation in different countries? Such values, they surmised, originate in culture. Cultures are not easily measured, but values are. So they set about the task of measuring values through a survey of 15,000 business executives in various countries.

Here are the responses to three of the survey items.

1. The executives were asked to choose between two propositions: the only real goal of a firm is making a profit; or, besides making a profit, a firm has a goal of attaining the wellbeing of employees and customers.

Over a third of those from four predominantly Anglo-Saxon countries (the UK, Australia, Canada and the USA) chose the pure profit goal, whereas just 10 per cent of the two East Asian countries (Japan and Singapore) did so.

2. This item explored employment practices. Which is the more important factor: that the applicant should fit into the firm's team, or have the relevant skills and a record of previous success?

Under 10 per cent of the Anglo-Saxon countries chose the fitting-in option, whereas over half the East Asian countries did.

3. This option concerned the tension between competition and collaboration. Respondents were asked to choose either competition between firms, because co-operation between them is a form of collusion against customer interests, or co-operation between firms, because it improves their effectiveness and gives benefits to customers.

Two-thirds of the Anglo-Saxon countries took the pure competition option, whereas three-quarters of the East Asian countries opted for collaboration.

In short, differences in business **practices** reflect differences in **values**, which in turn derive from underlying **cultures**. In East Asia much greater importance is evidently assigned to the quality of social relationships: the business workplace has to value these relationships for the general wellbeing of employees, but there is also a benefit to customers. Collaboration springs naturally from such values and has to be balanced with the evident value of competition. At a deeper level, do these values reflect national and organisational cultures, and if so, what is the nature and power of such a culture?

The focus of this thinkpiece, for both businesses and schools, is on cultures that underpin practices, not the practices themselves. It means looking at policy transfer option 4 – redesigning the policy to achieve the same ends by different means. Of course it is possible to learn from another country's practices and then replicate them: the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2011) has provided a useful list of what might be learned from educational practices in various countries, including China and Finland. Such lessons are not repeated here. The intention, rather, is to look behind the practices to explore what lies beneath, from which a different (and perhaps more subtle) lesson might be learned.

> Inter-school partnerships and alliances clearly depend on collaboration. What moral values underpin inter-school collaboration? Would the same moral values contribute to high levels of student achievement? How and why would this work? What culture, within schools and across alliances, underpins such values? Is your response to these questions tantamount to a description of the culture that might underpin a self-improving school system?

National cultures are immensely complex phenomena: countries that are geographically close often share some common cultural features that are expressed in idiosyncratic versions. In East Asia, different terms are given to the cultural stress on interdependence. In Japan it is *kankei*, which concerns access to networks of trusted people; in South Korea it is *inmak*, which refers to social ties, especially old-boy networks based on school and university friendships; and in China it is *guanxi*, which refers to social links based on exchanging favours (Hitt, Lee & Yucel, 2002). In short, there is a cultural bias towards creating high social capital – the trust and reciprocity that in *Leading a self-improving school system* (Hargreaves, 2011) we saw characterised highly effective businesses and their strategic alliances in Silicon Valley.

> Chinese *guanxi* networks... explain much of the success of original equipment manufacture supply chains which link small enterprises into clusters and then chains, and which have helped China to become 'the workshop of the world'... The social capital being used in such structures is that of interpersonal trust, based on the ethics of reciprocity. It leads directly to efficiency in transaction costs, as connections within the web are managed with low formality... The glue holding the structures together is interpersonal reciprocal obligation between the owner–managers and autonomous units. This is network capitalism.

Redding & Witt, 2007:54, 138-7

Social capital between people and organisations is a reflection of the rich cultural capital at a deeper East Asian level, and so need not be geographically confined as in the case of Silicon Valley. Different East Asian countries treat this cultural phenomenon in slightly different ways, but they have common roots in **Confucianism**. It is important to remember that Confucianism is not a religion, but a code of conduct for moral and social life that underpins social harmony and stability. It can, and often is, combined with explicit religions, including Christianity and Buddhism, as well as Daoism and widespread ancestor worship (Weller, 2011). It can be regarded as a form of **spiritual capital** and, like social capital, treated as a subset of cultural capital (Berger & Redding, 2011).

Seeking to learn educational lessons from East Asia is not new (Reynolds, 1995; Goodman, 1995; Reynolds & Farrell, 1996; Reynolds *et al*, 2002). High performance for students of Chinese origin is often attributed to Chinese school **practices** – stress on memorisation of large quantities of information, whole-class instruction, the longer school year, extra classes at the weekend and private tuition – or to 'Asian **values**' – respect for older people, stress on hard work and high valuation of formal education, which means that many pupils are highly motivated to learn, undoubtedly a huge advantage. But underlying highly variable **practices** and more stable **values** is the unwavering Confucian **cultural capital** in which the practices and values are rooted. It is this culture, rather than the practices, that is the focus of this thinkpiece.

We are far from understanding the relationships between practices, values and culture in their impact on how and why teachers behave as they do in schools and also on the achievement of students, who are in turn affected by other values and aspects of culture than those in school. The temptation is to treat these three levels as separate variables that can easily be measured or to ignore them in practice. Coffield (2011) challenges the McKinsey report (Mourshed, Chijioke & Barber, 2010) on the factors that drive the improvement of school systems on the grounds that it underplays:

> the complexities involved in attempting to derive lessons from another country... because of enormous differences in educational history, politics, socio-economic conditions, culture and institutional structures.

Coffield, 2011:7

In his incisive critique of flawed attempts at policy transfer in education, Robin Alexander notes that:

> treating culture as an independent variable in a statistical calculation encourages the assumption that you can detach an educational strategy from the values and conditions that give it meaning and ensure its success, transpose it to a context where these may be diametrically opposed, and yet expect it to deliver the same results.

<div align="right">Alexander, 2008:17</div>

> Culture – which is absolutely central to the proper pursuit of educational comparison – is reduced to one 'factor' among many, something which is external to school life rather than that which creates it and gives it meaning… If comparativists try to understand the character and power of context and culture, it is not so they can take refuge in context specificity, and deny the applications of what they study, but rather so that they can understand why 'what works' *there* but may or may not work here; and so that they can move beyond copying the surface features of 'what works' to a proper understanding of the thinking which informs it.

<div align="right">Alexander, 2010:807–8</div>

The process of decontextualising practices in this way, especially pedagogical practices, often results in an attempt to transfer what becomes little more than a travesty of the practice in its home setting. It reduces the art and science of teaching to nothing more than an incoherent bundle of disparate tactics.

There is a huge Chinese diaspora in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, the USA, Canada, Australia and of course the UK. The major study of the Chinese outside China itself attributes their worldwide educational and business success to Confucian cultural capital:

> The Chinese who have moved have remained in some deep and significant sense still Chinese; the majority of them have not psychologically left China, or at least not left some ideal and perhaps romanticised notion of Chinese civilization. This is the feature that unites and provides them with one of their most distinctive strengths – a capacity to cooperate… When they come from a society with a strong tradition of horizontal networking across the base of society, the ground is laid for the weaving of a net of great strength and flexibility. Such nets are fundamental to understanding overseas Chinese social and economic life.

<div align="right">Redding, 1993:2, 34</div>

Chinese diaspora networks have been described as having three advantages:

> First, they speed the flow of information across borders: a Chinese businessman in South Africa who sees a demand for plastic vuvuzelas will quickly inform his cousin who runs a factory in China. Second, they foster trust. That Chinese factory owner will believe what his cousin tells him and act on it fast… Third, and most important, diasporas create connections that help people with good ideas collaborate with each other.

<div align="right">The Economist, 2011</div>

In other words, deep in the Chinese culture are the wellsprings of the high social capital that in my previous thinkpiece was shown to characterise the effective businesses in Silicon Valley, which was a localised culture rather than a transnational one.

Does such cultural capital affect the performance of Chinese schools outside China? In England, for example, Chinese students are high performers. As Mansell (2011) reports:

> At GCSE, children of Chinese ethnicity – classed simply as 'Chinese' in the data – who are eligible for free school meals (FSM) perform better than the national average for all pupils, rich and poor. Not only that, but FSM Chinese pupils do better than those of most other ethnic backgrounds, even when compared with children from better-off homes (those not eligible for free school meals). A detailed look at the figures makes this clearer. Some 71 per cent of Chinese FSM pupils achieved five good GCSEs, including English and maths, in 2009. For non-FSM Chinese pupils, the figure was 72 per cent. Every other ethnic group had a gap of at least 10 percentage points between children who do not count as eligible for free meals, and those who do. The gap for white pupils stood at 32 percentage points[3].

> Mansell, 2011

That over two-thirds of Chinese FSM students obtain five GCSEs including English and maths is remarkable, especially when compared with the equivalent performance of students of other ethnic backgrounds – Indian/Pakistani origin, nearly half; Afro-Caribbean origin, one-third; white British, just over a quarter.

At the core of this culture is the family, with its strong ties and unbreakable bonds: it is at the heart of Chinese identity as well as relationships and networks that are family-like:

> Life in a collectivist and group-dominated society means that the Chinese self is not isolated in the same sense as the Western one. Other people are bound up into the identity of a single Chinese person, and relationships are carried round as part of the person. He or she is inextricably from that network, and not really understandable in isolation... [Firms] retain almost universally the characteristic of a family business... [During the Communist era] cooperation through personalistic networking appears not to have changed at all, but simply in the identifying of appropriate members. *Guanxi* is as essential as it ever was.

> Redding, 1993:95,116, 236

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3   There is evidence of a similar trend for Chinese/Asian American students in the USA: see Center on Education Policy (2010, 2011).

What might schools in England learn from China?

It seems, then, that high social capital helps to explain the high performance of the Chinese in business and in education, both in China itself and around the world. Is there an obvious lesson from China that we in England can learn? Does this reinforce the argument that high social capital is necessarily at the heart of a self-improving system that seeks to create an educational Silicon Valley effect?

> Did you choose high social capital as the master strand in the maturity model? If so, how do you think it relates to the other strands? If not, how does it relate to the strand you have chosen as the master strand?

Certainly school leaders could take action to increase the levels of trust, and there are lessons for school leaders to learn from business and other forms of partnership from around the world as well as from China. At the same time, is there something special that we might borrow from China as a form of policy transfer? It cannot be practices, because most practices in business differ from most practices in education, so China's success in both must be at a deeper level.

Children's learning is hugely affected by what teachers do in classrooms, but the common conviction that the most effective way forward is to mandate better classroom practices faces a double risk. The imposed practices may effect short-term and superficial behaviour change among teachers, but the lack of cultural roots may, as conditions change over time, cause them to wither. The related risk is that without a deep cultural base there is nothing to feed the innovation of yet better and sustainable practices.

Whilst the evidence shows that many practices have deeper roots in cultural capital, some practices may be more deeply rooted than are others. Indeed, we should probably think of a continuum: at one end of the spectrum practices with shallow roots in culture and at the other extreme practices that are so deeply rooted in culture that they would be almost impossible to uproot for successful transfer elsewhere. It is difficult for researchers, policymakers and teachers to make a firm judgement about where on this continuum a particular policy or professional practice might lie.

Can Chinese, and specifically Confucian, values be subjected to policy transfer? Introducing the study of Confucian values into the school curriculum, perhaps alongside citizenship or philosophy for children, is not a serious option. In any event, Confucian values are rooted at a very deep level in the culture: that is in the nature of tenacious and enduring moral and social codes.

Our only option is the fourth in the earlier list of forms of policy transfer, namely looking for much the same end, but seeking to achieve it by quite different means within our own context. The end is a moral equivalent to Confucianism, but the means would have to be based on something that is compatible with, and preferably already established, at least in part, in our own society. There is, in fact, an obvious place for us to look: the strong sense of **moral purpose** that draws teachers into the profession and underpins so much of what they believe (their values) and what they do (their practices).

> How strong is this sense of moral purpose in (i) the culture of your own school, and (ii) the culture that is being created between schools in your partnerships and alliances? Is this as important as high social capital in inter-school activities, such as joint practice development?

This moral base of teachers' professionalism has in recent years been shifting, particularly among headteachers designated as national or local leaders of education (NLEs and LLEs), who have accepted the notion that they are **system leaders**. This term is used in different senses and is not as yet widely understood across the teaching profession, even among headteachers. In England the word is most commonly applied to headteachers who work with other schools that are underperforming or in difficulties.

One of the most impressive developments among headteachers in England in recent years has been their enthusiastic commitment to the ideas of **distributed leadership**. My argument now is that system leadership also needs to be distributed. To understand the nature and implications of **distributed system leadership**, we need to examine the three central features of system leadership:

— First feature: a value – the conviction that leaders should strive for the success of other schools and their students, not just their own

The moral purpose to which teachers claim allegiance relates primarily, even exclusively, to the students in their own care and their own school. This is natural enough, and so is widespread throughout the profession. Over the years, competition between schools has encouraged a parochial version of moral purpose: look after your own. System leadership requires, on the contrary, a positive extension of moral commitment to other schools and students. This has happened with NLEs, LLEs and executive headteachers of federations and chains, who have broadened their normal moral commitment beyond their own students. As more schools move into deeper partnerships with other schools, this extension of moral commitment, initially espoused by NLE and LLE system leaders, will be more widely adopted to become inclusive of partner schools and their students.

— Second feature: professional practices – turning the value into action

Originally NLE and LLE system leaders walked the talk of their extended moral purpose by being willing to work with, and often in, other schools to help bring about improvements. In the new world of partnerships between schools, many more teachers and even students will spend time working with, and often in, other schools. They too will start to walk the talk of extended moral purpose, contributing to the success of partner schools by striving for collective improvement through mutual challenge and mutual development, especially in the form of **joint practice development**. Once teachers are actively working with other schools and their students, making this part of their professional moral purpose becomes natural, as it goes with the grain of the profession. It is at this point that system leadership becomes, like any other form of leadership, widely distributed in the profession.

Partnerships between schools are, I believe, fundamental to such an achievement. For some years there has been talk about how the profession needs to be committed to the success of all students, not just those in one's own school. This is a fine sentiment, of course, easily announced as an essentially abstract idea, far removed from the daily experience of most teachers and students. The practice, however, is much harder. It is when teachers are working alongside their colleagues from other schools on a regular basis, and when their students also rub shoulders, that this extended moral purpose becomes a vivid reality. It is when you experience close ties to others that a moral commitment to their success becomes an inherent part of that relationship.

If standalone schools remain the basic organisational unit of a school system, extended moral purpose remains a piece of rhetoric, a utopian dream. When the cluster is the basic organisational unit in a school system, extended moral purpose becomes both feasible and the key driver of the transformation, initially at the local level, into a self-improving school system.

— Third feature: a culture – extending the moral purpose from inter-school partnerships to the school system as a whole

If distributed system leadership is to become a cultural equivalent of Confucianism in China, it cannot be confined to inter-school partnerships and alliances. It means, rather, extending the moral purpose to embrace:

— all teachers in all schools in the system

— all students in those schools

— all governors in all schools

— all parents of students in all schools

Distributed system leadership is energised by a far greater moral power than the mutual self-interest of commonplace collaboration. It is only when distributed system leadership and extended moral purpose become embedded as a defining feature of the school system at the national level that we will have discovered a form of cultural capital to match that of Confucianism.

The first task is establishing it among all teachers. Partnerships between schools are vital, for here is the critical step in extending teachers' moral purpose beyond their own schools. Middle leaders and the new specialist leaders of education (SLEs) are the crucial bridge between headteachers, with an NLE and LLE commitment to the policy and practice of distributed leadership, and the many thousands of classroom teachers, on whom the success of such a venture ultimately rests. Headteachers may initially drive a shift in culture, but it is middle leaders and SLEs who embed it. As headteachers adopt the principles of system leadership, they should recognise the challenge of ensuring that their middle leaders share the same values and help to spread them throughout the profession.

Once system leadership is distributed among school staff within partnerships and alliances, it will not be difficult to gain a parallel commitment from students, especially where means are devised to enable students from the constituent schools to meet and to engage in mentoring and coaching. Governors and parents will be a bigger challenge. Governors often feel a very strong commitment to what they think of as their school and its success. Indeed, this rather parochial view has sometimes led them to resist the work of NLEs and LLEs with other schools and to be unenthusiastic about partnerships. At the same time, it is being recognised that conventional models of school governance are no longer fit for purpose, and under the leadership of some imaginative and pioneering chairs of governors, new models are being developed to cope with the emergent forms of inter-school partnerships and alliances. The groundwork for extended moral purpose among governors is being well laid.

Parents understandably give priority to the welfare and achievement of their own children. Parents may have chosen a particular school because of its perceived advantages over other schools, so why is their chosen school expending time and resources working with the schools that the parents did not choose? Before they embrace the principles of distributed system leadership, many headteachers have been reluctant to share their most gifted staff with other schools, often because they fail to see the potential of reciprocity that can benefit all schools and students in a partnership. Parents may feel the same, believing that inter-school sharing means depriving their own child. The challenge is to convince parents that an extended moral purpose yields benefits for all, and is a way of enhancing the education of their child, not diminishing it.

Ensuring that governors and parents appreciate the benefits of partnerships and alliances is clearly essential in gaining their commitment not only to the principle and practice of inter-school partnership but also to the underpinning cultural capital of extended moral purpose and distributed system leadership. Once stakeholders are so committed, it is possible for extended moral purposes to spread laterally from local partnerships and alliances to the whole school system level. There is, of course, the obvious question of how politicians, both national and local, might support and strengthen such a viral process. They potentially play a critical role in ensuring this cultural change at system as well as local level, which is a prerequisite for the system to become self-improving. It is widely held among politicians that competition drives up standards in the system: the challenge is now to recognise that a renewed culture of extended moral purpose is directed to the same end.

Is the goal of widespread commitment to extended moral purpose and distributed system leadership feasible? Only, I believe, with a significant cultural shift. 'The only thing of real importance that leaders do,' in the famous words of Edgar Schein (1985:2), 'is to create and manage culture,' and there is ample evidence in England of how effectively many headteachers have transformed their school culture to effect improvement. Good leaders change the organisation's culture, but system leaders change the system's culture. This is the next big challenge for school leaders in England.

> What action can school leaders and governors take to ensure that extended moral purpose and distributed system leadership are integral to partnerships and alliances? What action is needed from politicians, both local and national, and school leaders to take this to the national level?

It is now plain that in my view distributed system leadership is the most important of the 12 strands in the maturity model (Figure 1). In practical terms, where might one start to launch these four closely linked strands? One could start with a vision of a self-improving school system and thus treat establishing a commitment to distributed system leadership as the critical system driver. This could be attractive to politicians, local and national, as they have a predominantly system perspective, as do national institutions, such as the National College itself. Equally, one could, as will be the case for many teachers, governors, parents and students, start with high social capital within and between schools, which has palpable benefits, and build on that to make progress towards distributed system leadership.

Figure 1: Distributed system leadership and its three associated strands
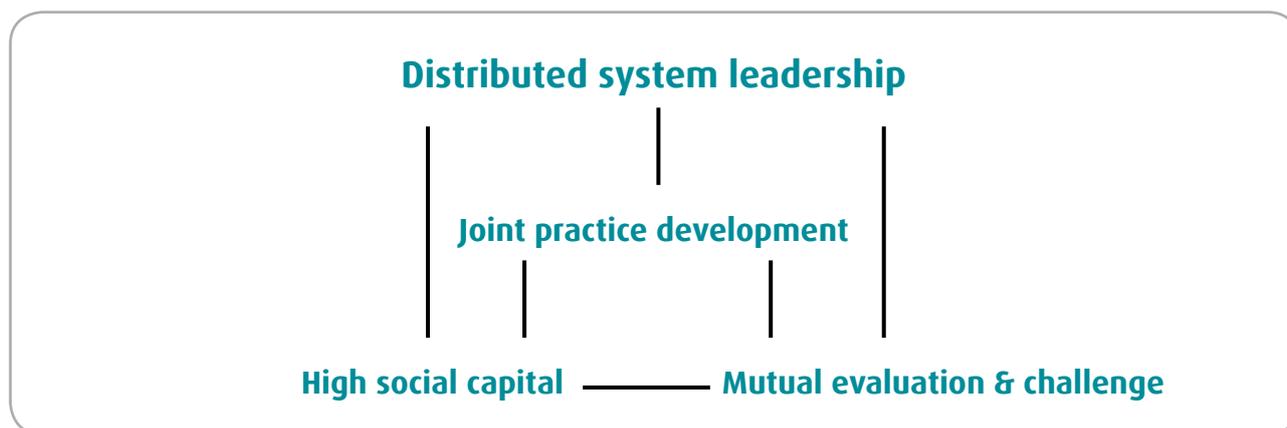
Starting with distributed system leadership helps to stimulate high social capital in a partnership, but a partnership's high social capital provides a basis for a movement to distributed system leadership. Intentionally there are no arrows in the diagrammatic representation of these interactions, because the arrows point both ways.

In the same way, distributed system leadership stimulates mutual evaluation and challenge between partners. This is critical, for a self-improving system has to be a **self-correcting system**, otherwise standards simply stabilise at their pre-existing level. It is not just headteachers who should engage in mutual evaluation and challenge: this reciprocal action should take place at all levels, particularly that of middle leaders and SLEs. If it does not, there is no basis for defining what aspects of professional practice need to be developed. The combination of mutual evaluation and challenge with high social capital drives and provides focus to joint practice development, which is an assured outcome when system leadership is distributed among partner schools.

These four strands, then, are at the heart of the maturity model, and without them a self-improving school system is impossible. In structural terms, England under its coalition government is moving away from a hierarchical model of an education system with a few standard models of schools (primary, secondary, special, independent) to a much more highly differentiated system (academies, federations, chains, free schools). The danger, of course, is that the school system will become progressively fragmented at the very time when, to create a self-improving system, we need shared cultural capital that injects common purpose into the system. To prevent disintegration, the system needs new social glue in the form of **cultural constants**. The four interacting strands, led by the extended moral purpose of distributed system leadership, will provide, I believe, the shared cultural underpinning of a school system that can retain both coherence and cohesion, whilst simultaneously becoming structurally more differentiated.

> What was your choice of master strand? If it differed from my preference, what is your theory of the case?

Which country is best placed to develop a self-improving school system?

The answer, it might seem, is China, on the basis of its deeply rooted Confucianism that generates so much success in education and business practices. But there is a twist to China's story that you have probably not guessed.

China has some relative disadvantages. Rapid economic development is being achieved at a price:

> China already has an estimated 300,000 dollar millionaires and the number is growing by about 50,000 a year... Analysts project that by 2015 nearly a third of the world's luxury goods will be sold in China with only America ahead. Conspicuous consumption is on the rise... The reality of life for most Chinese is not urban living... For the majority – an officially estimated 750 million – it is often the grinding poverty of rural life.

> Smith, 2007:226, 213

Whilst the Chinese education system instils a sound grasp of subject knowledge in its students, it has not yet learned how to combine this with broader educational outcomes:

> China may enjoy the reputation of educating some of the world's finest students, but it has not yet been able to produce the world's most creative scholars or graduates for the workforce with high problem-solving skills... Chinese do not lack knowledge or even wisdom: what they do lack is courage to serve society and improve the welfare of humankind. This is a major defect in China's educational system.

> Zhang, 2010:201

But there is an even more important worm eating the heart of China's apparent cultural advantage. Confucianism does provide the powerful moral base of the kind that I have argued is necessary for a self-improving school system. But the way it works in practice in China is not what one might expect. For Chinese businesses, the collaboration driven by the cultural and moral imperative of Confucianism is severely restricted to those with whom the firm has very close ties. High social capital between firms is, in fact, more circumscribed than it first appears. A close scrutiny of how trust operates in China is now in order.

Imagine four concentric circles that represent the distribution of social capital's trust and reciprocity (Figure 2). The central circle is where social capital is most intense: the family. This core circle is embedded in a larger circle containing close friends and business partners. Here social capital is also strong. The next circle is about connections and contacts: social capital is weaker here. Then there is the outer circle, in which there is everybody else - people not known personally, strangers. Here there is what from a Western viewpoint is a very striking almost total absence of trust.

Figure 2: Distribution of social capital's trust and reciprocity
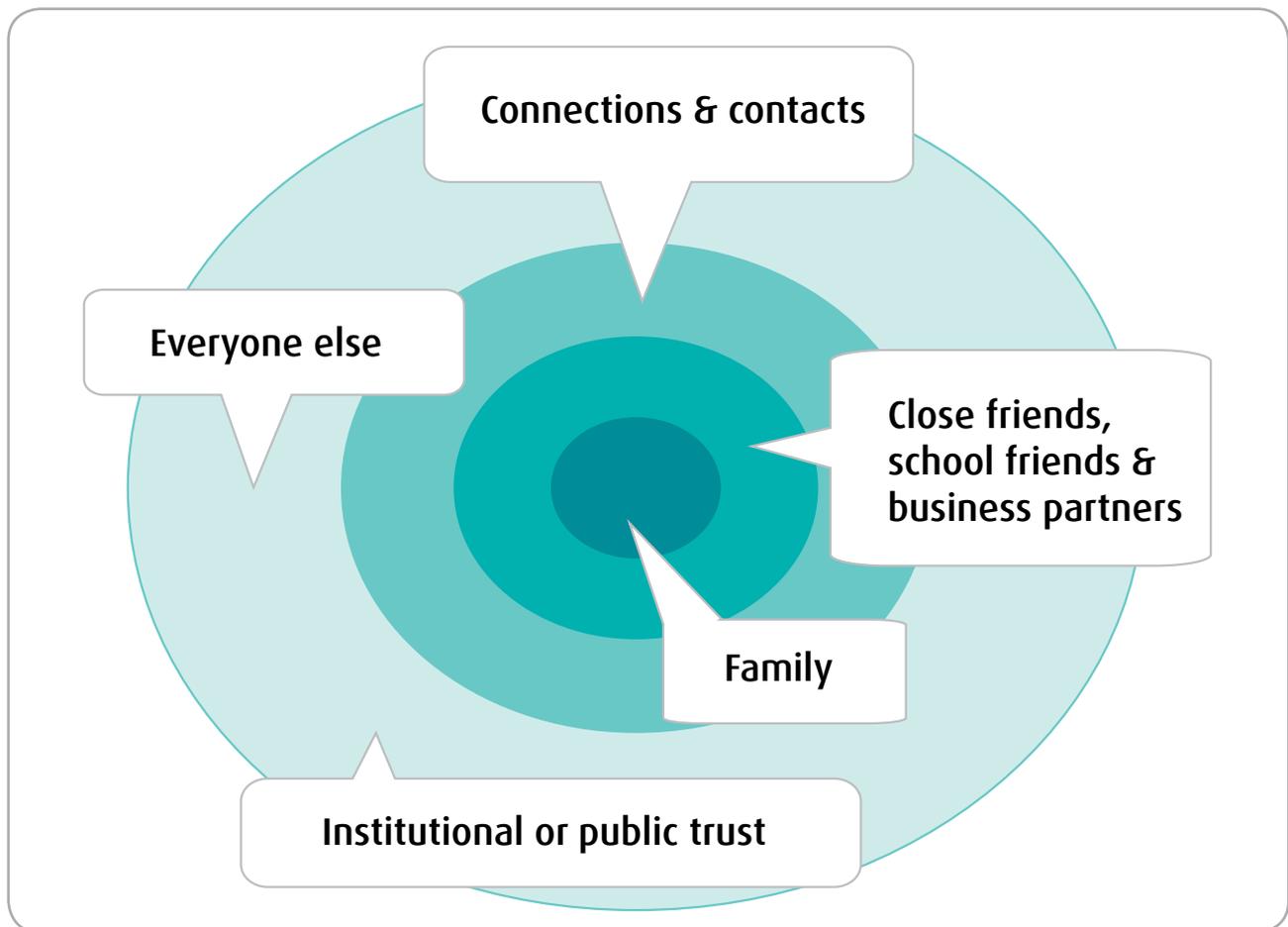
Trust takes many forms. At its weakest, there is simply goodwill, our working assumption that if we speak to a stranger, say on the street because we have lost our way, that person will treat us with courtesy and if possible be willing to assist. In China, just as there tends to be a much stronger trust within families than we are used to in the West, there is also much less of this basic goodwill form of trust between strangers:

> [In China] you trust your family absolutely, your friends and acquaintances to the degree that mutual dependence has been established and face invested in them. With everybody else you make no assumptions about their goodwill... To know your own motives well is, for the Chinese more than most, a warning about everybody else's... Chinese society has come to attach central importance to the notion of trust. What is Chinese about this trust, however, is that it is very specifically circumscribed. It is limited to partners in the bond... The heightened sensitivity to the importance of trust serves to make the network strong, as individuals fear to infringe such a powerful norm. It does however also point up the inability to connect easily into areas of society where the network does not penetrate, and where work is needed to establish it. The Chinese find it very difficult to come to terms with neutral, objective relationships, where they cannot 'read' trustworthiness.

> Redding, 1993:66-68

This surprising lack of trust in the outer circle, what is sometimes called **institutional** or **public trust**, makes sense when one takes account of the political history of China. Totalitarian states induce mistrust because there is an absence of intermediate and independent institutions between central control and the individual and family. China has lacked institutions we take absolutely for granted in Western capitalism, namely accountants and auditors, a free press, independent sources of statistics on any matters where the facts need to be known, and so on: it is these institutions that shore up public trust:

Western economists said transparency meant all public transactions should be predictable, fair to all parties involved, and completely documented... Asian economies dismissed the need for transparency and worked against it by placing a higher value on the strength of personal contact and the trustworthiness of the parties involved. An emphasis on personal trust and a distrust of transparency created a weak system of financial controls in Asia. Accounting standards and auditing procedures varied with each country and always seemed, at least to Western-trained accountants, to lack thoroughness. Due diligence was regularly overlooked.

<div align="right">Suleski, 2008:279</div>

Thus whilst China moves fast to its version of capitalism, much of the Western system of law and regulation is simply missing, and will not easily be put in place[4]:

[In China] institutional trust is in its infancy and its growth is not aided by any collective memory of its existence in the past. It is a new phenomenon in the Chinese political arena, and the immediate historical legacy from Mao is the experience of extreme, and often frightening, central control, the worst form of nursery for such a delicate plant. The apparatus for that control is still in place, although its abuse in the present era grows less likely as time passes.

<div align="right">Redding & Witt, 2007:211</div>

In short, China is marked by exceptionally high social capital in families and family-like networks, but exceptionally low social capital at a general societal level. This puts the Chinese at a disadvantage when it comes to the formation of partnerships and strategic alliances beyond small, and especially family, businesses where strong personal relationships can be established. When there is no independent information about potential but non-family partners to guarantee their trustworthiness, partnerships will be treated with great caution or even shunned, and for good reason: any such partnership would entail high transaction costs as the partners would be under suspicion and thus need constant monitoring.

At the same time, there is little ground for complacency about high levels of public trust in the West. In a provocative and controversial book, Robert Putnam (2000) argued that social capital in the USA is in sharp decline. His argument, based on a wide variety of measures, is that social bonds and trust have weakened and the lack of social glue is causing a reduction in social cohesion. For some critics the analysis can be plausibly applied to England. In terms of the more specific institutional trust, the failures of regulation in relation to the recent banking crisis, the collapse of trust in politicians in the light of the scandal over MPs' expenses, and concerns about the press as a result of phone hacking could all be seen as further support for a claim of declining social capital and public trust in England. Yet these matters are always relative. Putnam may be justified in proposing the urgent need for countermeasures to prevent a further decline in Western social capital, but it seems likely that in relation to public trust the West is still well ahead of China. We are repairing our public trust: the Chinese are building it from scratch.

High social capital within a firm or a school is vital for quality of life and overall effectiveness. Partnerships, whether between firms or between schools, also need high social capital, and this is most easily achieved when there are strong personal ties between all involved. Schools in close geographical proximity have many more opportunities for building strong relationships based on trust, provided they can deal with potentially destructive competition. Where partnerships are geographically distant, and competition does not mar relationships, the potential for high collaboration depends on high levels of institutional or public trust. Here English schools have a marked advantage over schools in China.

In its current rapid development, China is keen to learn what it can from the West, as its new value system stresses market-driven efficiency, competition and accountability. Education is no exception to this trend, as made clear in a recent collection of essays (Huang & Wiseman, 2011). Before the mid-1980s,

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4   *The Economist* of 5 November 2011 reports: 'The grey men at the top of China's main regulatory agencies do not change often. So the appointment of new bosses to the agencies supervising the banking, securities and insurance industries has created a splash.' See also Hsueh (2011).

the centre made all the important decisions in education, and local education authorities had a merely executive function. With decentralisation, local authorities were given new financial and fiscal powers and responsibilities and were expected to be more responsive in curriculum matters to local conditions and needs on the basis of the fifteen to twenty per cent of curriculum time outside the national curriculum. Forms of non-state or private schooling were also introduced. However, a strong inspection system and a national standardised testing system remained. As teaching concentrated on examination performance, which determined student careers and the standing of schools, teaching understandably continued to rely on rote memorisation and the passive acquisition of textbook-based subject knowledge.

In 1999, the policy of **quality education** (suzhi jiaoyu) was introduced, with several dramatic shifts in emphasis: from the acquisition of transmitted knowledge to fostering learning attitudes and values, including learning how to learn; from compartmentalised subjects to integrated learning experiences; from an abstract curriculum content to a content relevant to student interests and life experiences; from passive learning and drilling to the promotion of inquiry-based learning, creativity and active student participation.

The impact of this 'quality education' policy on Shanghai's school principals has been investigated by Haiyan Qian and Ållan Walker (2011). To English headteachers their findings will come as no surprise, and may even be consoling as the PISA success of Shanghai schools is brandished before them. The principals found it exceedingly difficult to implement the new practices suggested by the quality education reforms for several reasons:

— principals remained locked in a hierarchical bureaucratic system

— the reform was a top-down initiative that they had neither bought into nor been provided with relevant professional support and additional autonomy

— the assessment and examination system remained unchanged

Since principals felt under pressure to persist in their pre-reform practices, the ideas behind quality education were sidelined into elective and extended courses, making their impact superficial.

> The whole educational system was characterised as examination-driven. Teaching was geared to the examinations; teachers focused on academically promising students and ignored others; rote learning dominated classroom teaching and students were weighed down by excessive homework and examination pressure... In the principals' eyes, exam performance, along with everything this entailed, remained the number one priority. Principals therefore dared not risk changing traditional teaching and learning practices, especially if they produced good exam results... Principals were unequivocal in stating that the quality of school determined parental choice. However, most principals interpreted the quality of the school as equating to high student achievement in [examinations]... Principals were caught between the forces of change and continuity... Principals were expected to produce a stable pattern of good student performance in high-stakes exams, but they also had to publicly demonstrate their adherence to the new curriculum policies... This disconnection between enduring and new policy expectations inevitably tears principals apart.
>
> Qian & Walker, 2011: 189, 198, 200, 205-6

In a world that is so dominated by examination performance and ruthless competition between schools, it seems unlikely that the Chinese will try to borrow from England the idea of a self-improving system based on inter-school partnerships. Low levels of professional autonomy for Chinese principals will make it impossible for them to engage in inter-school partnerships that strive for a healthy balance between competition and collaboration, as is happening with English schools – and, ironically, in Chinese businesses. For the Chinese to copy our emergent self-improving school system they would have to engage in a rapid catch-up on Western levels of institutional trust at a time when they are finding it difficult to do so in support of the further development even of the much more autonomous businesses. Moreover, they would probably not be able to copy our version of distributed system leadership, which conflicts with China's existing cultural bias.

In short, since a self-improving system requires *all* schools to make high-quality partnerships, England can move to such a system far more quickly than is possible in China. England has a head start, in terms of the many well-established inter-school partnerships that already exist and in terms of the backcloth of high institutional trust that gives schools the confidence to embark on partnership building.

> Are you persuaded that England has a head start in building the extensive partnerships and alliances on which a self-improving school system is based? What in your view is the action that now needs to be taken at the levels of (i) individual schools, (ii) inter-school alliances, (iii) local government and (iv) central government?

It could be a very different matter in the case of Finland. It has been shown by Kupiainen, Hautamaki and Karjalainen (2009) that Finnish education policy has shifted dramatically over recent decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, Finland followed a wider world trend towards centralised control and decision-making, for example through a centralised curriculum and external evaluation through inspection. By the 1990s and early in the new millennium, the emphasis had shifted towards self-governance (ie, self-direction, self-regulation and self-evaluation), schools as learning organisations, and performance-based funding. Finland had indeed become a deviant as a comparison of the current Finnish system with the general Western model so clearly reveals (Table 3).

Table 3: Comparison of Finnish and Western educational systems

General Western model	The Finnish system
1. Standardisation Strict standards for schools, teachers and students to guarantee the quality of outcomes	**1. Flexibility and diversity** School-based curriculum development, steering by information and support
2. Emphasis on literacy and numeracy Basic skills in reading, writing, maths and science as prime targets of educational reform	**2. Emphasis on broad knowledge** Equal value to all aspects of individual growth and learning: personality, morality, creativity, knowledge and skills
3. Consequential accountability Evaluation by inspection	**3. Trust through professionalism** A culture of trust in teachers' and headteachers' professionalism in judging what is best for students and in reporting progress

Source: Kupiainen, Hautamaki & Karjalainen, 2009:12

It is evident that in England the coalition government is reforming the education system along a path of decentralisation similar to that in Finland, but only partially.

Should the Finns choose to develop inter-school partnerships, they could move yet further ahead of us. However, they have a geographical disadvantage in the formation of partnerships, in that the Finnish population is more unevenly distributed than in England, with a larger number of small rural schools which are attended by a third of the population.

> Is thoroughgoing decentralisation the important lesson England can learn from Finland?

Developing a good theory of a self-improving system

The remaining question concerns the relationships between all the strands in the maturity model. Here I set out what I currently see as the main links between the strands (Figure 3). One possible sequence starts from getting governance right, since this determines who does what in the alliance: it is on this basis that talents are identified and the knowledge of that is distributed within the alliance. These strands then contribute to joint practice development (JPD), which is at the heart of the transfer of knowledge and practice across the alliance schools, as well as the basis for the innovation of next practice. A second route feeds JPD, starting from distributed system leadership, which provides the moral base of the alliance, driving the high social capital that supports mutual evaluation and challenge, which in turn ensures that JPD is focused on the critical practices that need to be shared and developed. The four strands of the third dimension, collaborative capital, I envisage as emerging out of the interactions among the strands of the first two dimensions. Again I have not used arrows to indicate the main direction of flow between the strands, not least because many of them influence one another in both directions.

Figure 3: Links between the strands of a self-improving system
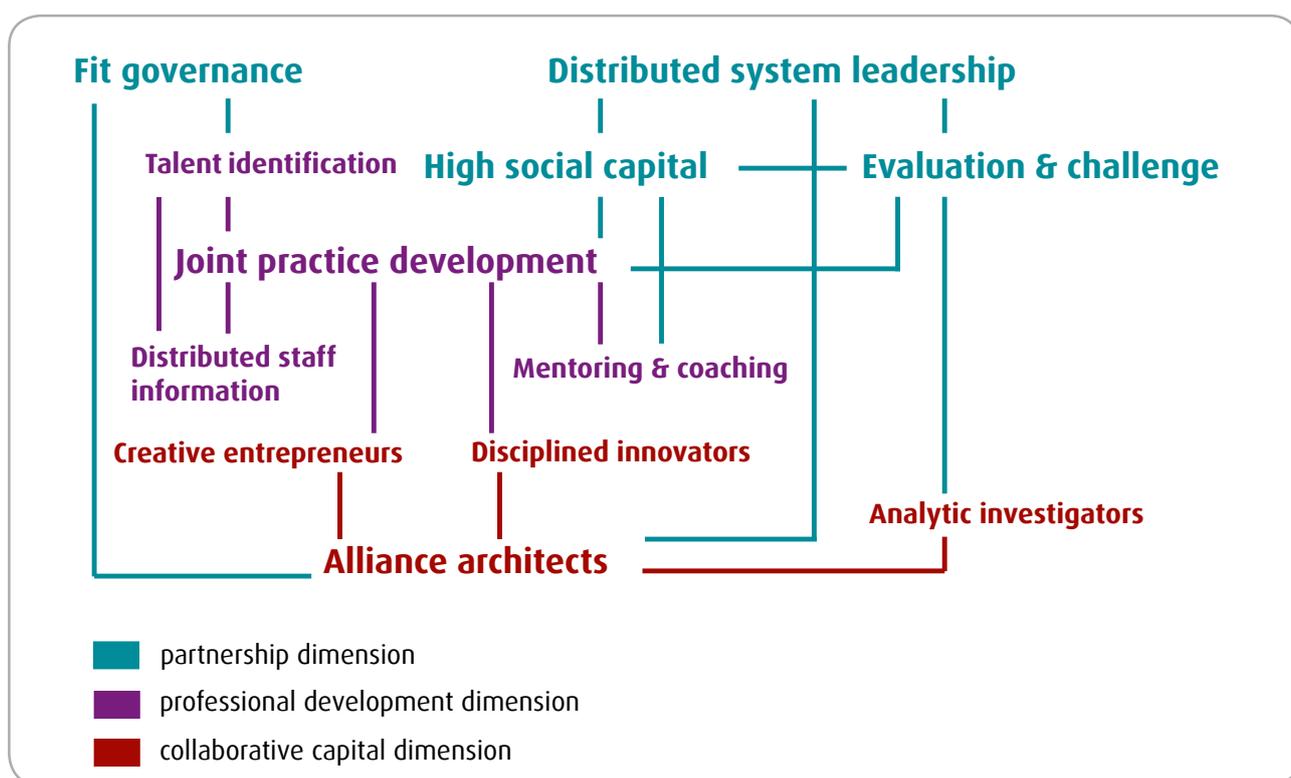
Progress towards a self-improving school system will be inhibited if we neglect to develop a compelling and coherent theory of the case. This thinkpiece has expounded one possible theory of the case that treats some strands of a maturity model as more important than others and that also explains the relationships between the strands. There will, and should be, other ways of telling this story and sketching scenarios for the future, not least by the school leaders who are pioneers of inter-school partnerships and strategic alliances.

> What was your choice of master strand? If it differed from my preferences, what is your theory of the case? Could you set out what you see as the links between all the strands to provide a more comprehensive account of your view of a theory of the case? Do you think your version is specific to your local context or has it a wider applicability?

Your conjectures about what works are grist to the mill. 'The growth of knowledge,' says David Deutsch (2011:47), 'consists in correcting misconceptions in our theories.' Advancing our professional knowledge about partnerships and alliances through the correction of misconceptions cannot occur until we have more explicit practitioner theories about what goes on in partnerships. It is then that steps can be taken to align the theories of the case espoused by school leaders and by government. At present they are not aligned. The path to a self-improving system demands that they be aligned.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this thinkpiece, I raised two issues about the maturity model of the partnerships and alliances that are the building blocks of a self-improving school system: the relative importance of the strands and the relationships between the strands. I set these tasks within an international context in the hope that some lessons might thus be learned.

We have explored the relative importance of the strands in the maturity model and the relations between the strands in a way that will discourage an unduly mechanistic use of the maturity model. There are three related lessons from our international journey:

— Develop a compelling and coherent theory of the case for partnerships and alliances as the building blocks of a self-improving system.

— Forge the right culture for partnerships and a self-improving system, which is harder than establishing the necessary structures.

— Ensure that the next steps in the process of decentralisation of our school system serve to support the above two processes.

Without a better **theory of the case**, one that is compelling and coherent, we shall have an inadequate grasp of what we are doing and why: such a theory helps to guide the teaching profession and the politicians and policymakers who have responsibility for the education service. If this shared theory is compelling and coherent, it will be so much easier to persuade the wider public of the attractions of a self-improving school system, as well as inform other nations that might seek to learn from our experience.

The second lesson is that putting in place the basic **structures** of a self-improving system, namely inter-school partnerships and alliances, is not enough, for this does not create the **culture** from which grow the values and practices of those who run the partnerships and alliances. There may be real gains from looking around the world for some educational policies and practices that might benefit our schools. But a transformation of schooling that is self-generating and sustainable requires that attention be paid to the deep cultural capital that underpins the life of individual schools, of partnerships and alliances, and of the school system as a whole. This is the key lesson we learn from China and East Asia, one by which we can develop our version, based on our own well-established native roots of extended moral purpose and distributed system leadership. It is this which drives the critical within-school and within-alliance processes that guarantee high standards of teaching and learning, and the social capital nurturing the trust and reciprocity that support mutual evaluation and challenge, which in turn spawn the joint practice development on which transformative classroom practices depend.

The third lesson concerns the nature of the **decentralisation** that is a prerequisite of a self-improving school system, one that depends largely on political decisions. In recent times schools in England have, I believe, been leading the world in the development of two linked features of school systems: highly effective school leadership and productive partnerships and alliances between schools. It is impossible to create a self-improving school system without these crucial features. The government's current decentralisation policies in education are in many ways creating the right conditions. The lesson from Finland is that these policies probably have to go further, but in our own distinctive way. In my experience many headteachers are finding it difficult to escape the culture of compliance to which they have become addicted and instead espouse the freedoms of promised decentralisation. The government's policies need to be set within a more coherent and compelling philosophy of decentralisation and a more explicitly moral educational culture that, in combination, will inspire school leaders and the various stakeholders in our schools. To understand the radical nature of this policy shift and its huge potential for a self-improving school system, everybody should look at the school system as a whole, its structures and its culture:

Mostly we don't take time to notice the dynamics that are moving in the whole system, creating effects everywhere. As good engineers, we've been trained to identify the problem part and replace it. But a system sensibility quickly explains why this repair approach most often fails. Individual behaviours co-evolve as individuals interact with system dynamics. If we want to change individual or local behaviours, we have to tune into these system-wide influences. We have to use what is going on in the whole system to understand individual behaviour and we have to inquire into individual behaviour to learn about the whole.

Wheatley, 1999:142

What I have written is a provocative thinkpiece, not an attempt at original academic scholarship. It offers the challenge of whether, willing to learn some lessons from both China and Finland, we can construct the compelling and coherent theory of the case for a recultured self-improving school system and then have the imagination and determination to build on recent English achievements to reach the next level before others beat us to it.

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