The Role of the Head
in School Improvement

Michael Fullan

It has often been observed that the head of the school is a key factor in how effective the school is. But until recently we did not have a clear picture about what this role looks like in action. In this brief paper I will characterize the nature of school improvement in relation to the role of the head, and then raise questions about how we could produce more effective leadership. Newmann, King and Young's (2000) recent paper provides an important framework for understanding continuous school improvement which focuses on student achievement. They claim, as we have, that the critical factor is school capacity - the collective competency of the school as an entity to bring about effective change. To understand school capacity is to understand the work of successful school heads. There are four core components of capacity according to Newmann et al:

*   Knowledge, skills and dispositions of individual staff members;

*   A professional learning community in which staff work collaboratively to set clear goals for student learning, assess how well students are doing, develop action plans to increase student achievement, all the while being engaged in inquiry and problem-solving;

*   Program coherence - "the extent to which the school's programs for student and staff learning are coordinated, focussed on clear learning goals and sustained over a period of time" (p. 5);

*   Technical resources - high quality curriculum, instructional material, assessment instruments, technology, workspace, etc.

This four-part definition of school capacity is crucial to understand. It includes 'human capital', i.e., the skills of individuals but concludes that no amount of professional development of individuals will have an impact if certain organization features are not in place. One organizational feature relates to 'professional learning communities' which in effect is the 'social capital' aspect of capacity. In other words, the skills of individuals can only be realized if the relationships within the schools are continually developing.

The other component of organizational capacity is program coherence. Since complex social systems have a tendency to produce overload and fragmentation in a non-linear evolving fashion, schools are constantly being bombarded by overwhelming and unconnected innovations (Fullan, 1999). In this sense, the most effective schools are not those which take on the sheer most number of innovations, but those which selectively take on, integrate and coordinate innovations into focussed programs. Finally, acquiring technical resources that support individual, collective and program coherence is vital.

All the talk about the key role of the school head boils down to how principals foster school capacity building (in terms of the four components) in the service of student learning. We can take as cases in point, recent findings in England, Canada and the United States. Day et al's (2000) study of school leaders in England in twelve schools

shows very clearly that these effective heads constantly work at helping individuals develop, continually work at enhancing relationships in the school and between the school and community, and maintain a focus on goal and program coherence. Similarly, Leithwood et al's (1999) school leaders in Canada spend their time developing people, building commitment to change, creating the conditions for growth in teachers, and relating to outside forces while continually acquiring and targeting resources. In the same vein, Sebring and Bryk's research in Chicago reform shows that school leadership is a determining factor in school success. School heads lead the charge in focussing on instruction, school-wide mobilization of resources and effort with respect to the long-term emphasis on instruction, and above all they "attack incoherence."

There are many details within the school capacity work of school heads. Helping to develop individuals covers all the nuances of contending with the emotional vicissitudes of teaching, and dealing with persistently failing teachers. Similarly, working with a variety of teachers in establishing team work involves coping with the incredibly difficult matter of 'resistance to change'. It requires great insight and sophistication (to name one aspect, learning how to 'respect those you wish to silence' can pay great dividends both technically (improving ideas) and politically (with respect to improving relationships which affect implementation). Achieving program coherence in the face of multiple disjointed policy demands and expectations demands outstanding leadership, as does the acquisition of technical resources.

Implications

If the above analysis is correct, there are two very powerful implications. The first concerns the preparation of school leaders, and

the second involves the conditions under which they work. Preparing School Leaders

There is no doubt, as I have said, that effective schools virtually always have strong school leaders. The measure of a strong school leader is one who develops the school's capacity to engage in reform - a capacity which is stronger at the end of the leader's term than at the beginning. What is less certain is what proportion of school leaders are that good. I know of no study that can tell us the proportion of school leaders who are effective at enhancing school capacity. If I had to estimate, it would probably be in the two in five range.

Second, I know of no study that has both identified effective school leaders, and traces their effectiveness to the preparation he or she received on the way to becoming a head. This, of course, is the mandate of the new National College of School Leadership (as well as the responsibility of schools and LEA's). The task, put explicitly, is to recruit, develop, nurture, support and hold the head accountable. The measure of effectiveness should be a dramatic increase in the proportion of school leaders who can develop greater school capacity - moving from our hypothetical two in five, to four in five.

Conditions of Works

The conditions under which heads work greatly affects the quality of people attracted to the role, and their effectiveness once they are in the role. Currently, in most jurisdictions around the world there is a shortage of candidates to take on the position of head. It is not seen as an attractive position. Part of the problem relates to the neglect of leadership over the past ten years. There has been a hiatus during the 1990's during which time there was a failure to cultivate leadership for

the future. In so doing, we have lost a generation of leadership training resulting in shortages at all levels.

In addition, the job itself has become increasingly problematic. During this period of the past decade there has been less opportunity to learn on the job. The need, then, is to pay explicit attention to the cultivation of leadership.

Just as teaching is a lonely profession, school leadership is more so. There are numerous ways in which the isolation of principals should be overcome. At the most comprehensive level the job of the school head will become more worthwhile when the overall infrastructure of reporting improves. Put differently, when states align policy and investments, integrating accountability and development, the position of school head will become more pivotable and more productive (for an excellent example of coordinated policy at the state level see Barber, 2000). On the principalship itself, the opportunity to learn on the job through problem-based conferences, networking, linking to the big picture will make the position exciting and uplifting (see Elmore and Burney, for one example at the school district level). In short, school leadership must be doable and rewarding. It must offer opportunity to learn on the job and to give heads the feeling that they are part and parcel of a larger effort to make a difference in society as a whole.

One last caution. As important as the principal is, quality teachers are obviously even more important. Thus, policy development must enhance the status, role and accountability of the teaching profession. First, quality teachers make quality heads. The stronger the pool of good teachers, the stronger that future heads will be as they come from the pool. In numbers, heads will be only as strong as the teaching force is in the first place. Second, because schools are organizations and because the principal is the head of the

organization, it falls to him or her to focus on school-wide capacity which is essential to bringing out the best in teachers.

Ironically, up to the present, everyone acknowledges how crucial school heads are, but there has been little attention paid to make them more effective. This will have to change if we are to 'go to scale' in seeing the majority of our schools do well.

References

Baker, M. (2000) 'High expectations and standards for all, no matter what. London, Department of Education and Employment.

Day, C., Harris, A., Hadfield, M. Tolley, H, & Beresford, J. (2000) Leading Schools in Times of Change. Buckingham, Open University Press.

Elmore, R. and Burney, D. (1999) 'Investing in teaching learning', in L.Darling-Hammond and G. Sykes (eds), Teaching as a Learning Profession. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, pp. 236-291.

Fullan, M. (1999) Change Forces: The Sequel. London, Falmer Press; Bristol,PA, Falmer Press.

Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D. & Steinbeck, R. (1999) Changing Leadership for Changing Times. Buckingham, Open University Press.

Newmann, F., King, B., Young, P. (2000) 'Professional development that addresses school capacity: Lessons from urban elementary schools. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association.

Sebring, P. and Bryk, A. (2000) 'School leadership and the bottom line in Chicago, Kappan, February, 440-443.

Michael Fullan is dean
of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
of the University of Toronto.

He is the author of *Leading in a Culture of Change*, the *Change Forces Trilogy*, and *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership.*

www.michaelfullan.ca

Statements from this essay are referenced in Promoting Effective Teaching and Learning (Educational/Instructional Leadership) Research and Practice (quote 1 and quote 2) and Promoting Effective Teaching and Learning (Educational/Instructional Leadership) Futures and Policy Thinking.