Leadership from the Middle

A system strategy

By Michael Fullan

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MY COLLEAGUES AND I have been working on "whole system change" (how *all* schools in a province/state/country can improve) since we carried out the evaluation of England's literacy and numeracy strategy from 1998-2002.[1] We then applied the lessons from England to Ontario's reform strategy that began in 2003. In an earlier article for CEA[2] I identified the "big ideas" as:

1. All children can learn
2. A small number of key priorities
3. Resolute leadership
4. Collective capacity
5. Strategies with precision
6. Intelligent accountability
7. All means *all*.

We have learned a great deal about whole system change, which we have captured in a complete case study of Ontario, 2003-2015.[3] As we examined and worked with systems around the world - some that were relatively centralized and some relatively decentralized - we began to search for a more powerful way to seek whole system success regardless of the starting point.

The answer, and the focus of this article, is "Leadership from the Middle" (LftM), first identified by Hargreaves and Braun[4] in their evaluation of the implementation of a special education initiative in Ontario. For this initiative, the government allocated $25 million to the Council of Ontario Directors of Education to lead implementation across all 72 districts. The government, if you like, asked "the middle" - the districts - to lead system change.

LftM and its rationale

In education system terms, the top is the state, the middle is districts or regions, and the bottom is schools and

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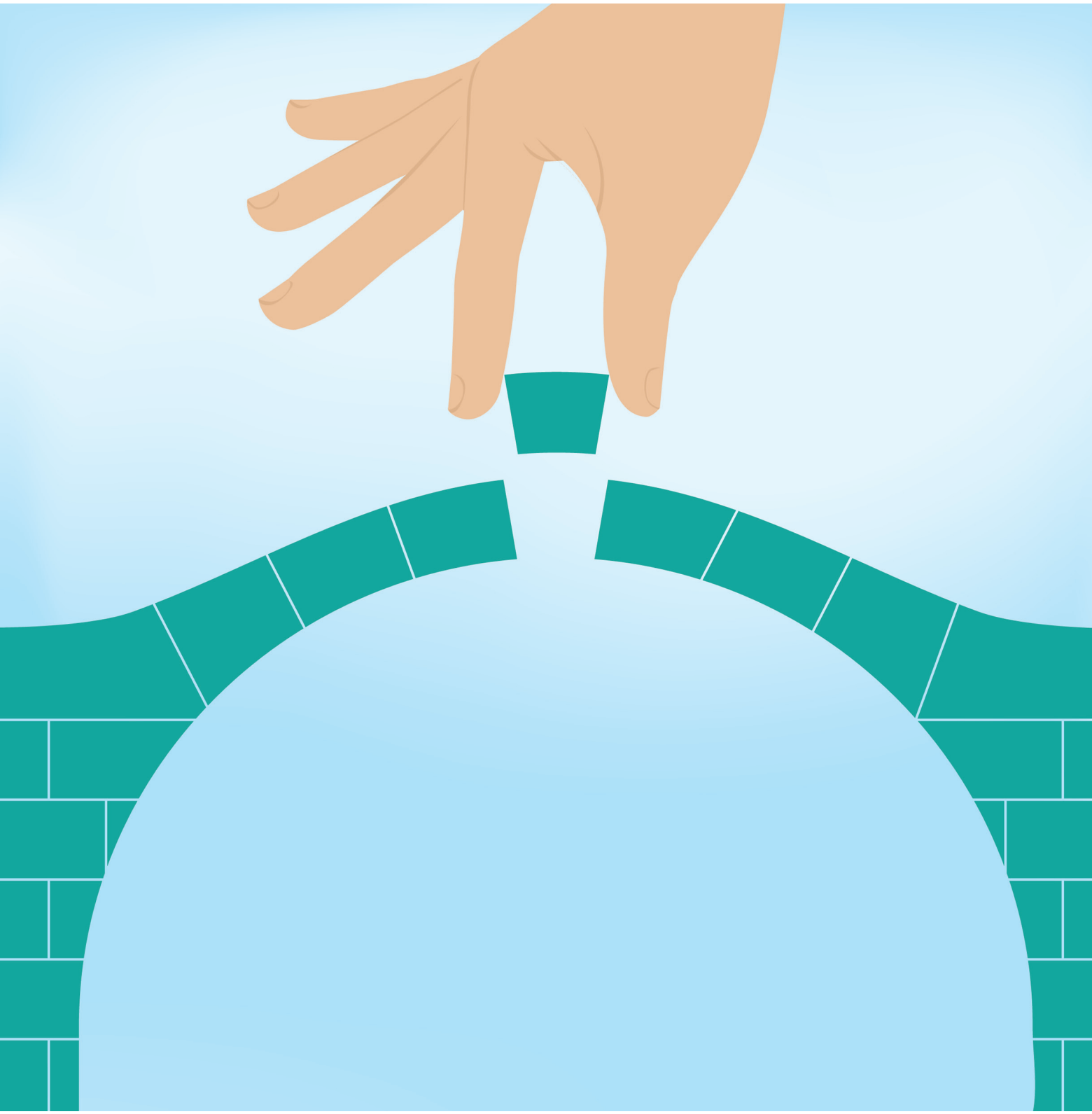

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Le changement issu d'une approche descendante « top-down » des gouvernements n'engendre pas un changement systémique (amélioration de toutes les écoles), pas plus que le changement issu d'une approche ascendante « bottom-up », venant de la base où chaque école jouit d'autonomie, n'amènent de grands progrès. Pour rehausser la cohérence et l'impact à l'échelle du système, une nouvelle stratégie beaucoup plus prometteuse voit le jour : le leadership provenant du milieu (« LpM »). Le LpM renforce les conseils scolaires et les réseaux d'écoles, qui collaborent pour régler des problèmes précis en vue d'accroître des capacités pédagogiques et des compétences collectives ayant des effets mesurables sur l'engagement des élèves. Dans cet article, l'auteur cite la Nouvelle-Zélande et l'Ontario comme exemples de la mise en pratique de cette stratégie mobilisatrice. Le LpM est mieux adapté à l'innovation, à la diffusion, à l'engagement des élèves et des enseignants, ainsi qu'à des apprentissages en profondeur tels le développement de la personnalité, l'éducation à la citoyenneté, la collaboration, la créativité et la pensée critique. Bref, le LpM consiste à mobiliser tout le système en vue des nouveaux modes d'apprentissage plus profonds requis pour le 21e siècle.

communities. Top-down leadership doesn't last even if you get a lot of the pieces right, because it is too difficult to get, and especially to sustain, widespread buy-in from the bottom. In many ways the Ontario strategy was led from the top (the government), and although it did contain many strong partnership ideas, it ultimately will not be embedded enough to establish sustainable system change (see the discussion of New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL) and Ontario below). Similarly, bottom-up change (e.g. school autonomy) does not result in overall system improvement; some schools improve, others don't and the gap between high and low performers grows wider.

The key question, then, is how can we achieve the strongest *system coherence, capacity and commitment* resulting in sustained improvement?

Leadership from the Middle can be briefly defined as: *a deliberate strategy that increases the capacity and internal coherence of the middle as it becomes a more effective partner upward to the state and downward to its schools and communities, in pursuit of greater system performance.* The goal of LftM is to develop greater overall system coherence by strengthening the focus of the middle *in relation to system goals and local needs.* Thus, it is not a standalone, but rather a connected strategy. This approach is powerful because it mobilizes the middle (districts and/or networks of schools), thus developing widespread capacity, while at the same time the middle works with its schools more effectively and becomes a better and more influential partner upward to the center.

The LftM strategy is being used in several systems around the world, and my colleagues and I are currently involved in initiatives in California (districts working with each other on system goals), Connecticut (districts working in cohorts), and Quebec (again districts working together on local and province-wide priorities). For this article I will draw on two examples: one from the relatively decentralized system of New Zealand; the other from the relatively centralized province of Ontario.

System change in New Zealand

In 1989, New Zealand passed a radical (at the time) piece of legislation entitled *Tomorrow's Schools* that abolished regional authority and created individual school autonomy, with each school having its own school council. Assessing its impact is beyond the scope of this article, but we can say that by and large, improved performance of the overall system did not ensue (for example, the gap between high- and low-performance schools increased). In 2014, the current government passed another initiative, called *Investing in Education Success,* that provided a substantial new budget of 369 million NZ dollars in order to set up networks of schools that would work together to leverage improvement. There are some 2,500 schools in New Zealand; it was expected that all schools would participate in networks of 5-20 schools. Initially the proposal was imposed on the system and was greeted with widespread opposition.

Over the past year and a half, the system has worked on a resolution that I would essentially call an LftM solution. For example, the government and the primary school teachers'/principals' federations worked out guidelines in something called the "Joint Initiative." Here are its five fundamental principles:[5]

1. Children are at the centre of a smooth and seamless whole of educational pathway, from earliest learning to tertiary options.
2. Parents who are informed and engaged are involved in their children's education and part of a community with high expectations for and of those children.
3. Teachers and education leaders, supported by their own professional learning and growth, and those of their colleagues, will systematically collaborate to improve educational achievement outcomes for their students.
4. Teachers and education leaders will be able to report measurable gain in the specific learning and achievement challenges of their students.
5. Teachers and leaders will grow the capability and status of the profession within clearly defined career pathways for development and advancement.

Within these overarching principles, New Zealand is working out additional requirements to guide the work of emerging networks. These guidelines are consistent with eight criteria that Santiago Rincon-Gallardo and I formulated in relation to LftM networks of schools or districts. We have identified eight essential ingredients of effective networks:[6]

1. Developing high-trust relationships
2. Focusing on ambitious student learning goals linked to measurable outcomes
3. Continuously improving instructional practice
4. Using deliberate leadership and skilled facilitation
5. Frequently interacting and learning inwards
6. Connecting outward to learn from others
7. Forming new partnerships among students, teachers and families
8. Securing adequate resources to sustain the work.

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It is too early to assess the impact of New Zealand's LftM strategy, but it does provide a clear example of deliberately trying to mobilize the middle for system success.

New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (NPDL) in Ontario

Ontario makes for a particularly interesting case because it has had strong success using an assertive strategy from the government combined with partnerships with its districts. This has served the province well on basic measures of literacy, numeracy (though less impressively), and high school graduation. What becomes evident is that such a model may not be suitable for innovation and its related 21st century skills.

My colleagues and I are pursuing, in seven countries including Canada, a strategy that we call New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (www.npdl.global). New pedagogies refer to developing learning partnerships between and among students, teachers, and families. We are currently defining and developing the details of these partnerships, which essentially are based on proactive learning roles for students and for teachers using the latest pedagogical practice.

Deep learning is the 6Cs: Character education, citizenship, collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. Again we are defining and developing instruments to assess and support these outcomes.

There are currently some 15 districts in Ontario and Manitoba working to implement and disseminate these ideas in practice. Let me be explicit how this represents Learning from the Middle:

- The center of gravity of NPDL is districts and schools, not the province. The ideas are compatible with government policy but not *led* by the province. This is especially interesting in Ontario because after some eight years of central leadership (2003-2011), districts are having more opportunity to lead change. I cannot say that this is a result of deliberate policy but can observe that many districts are showing new initiative in their own right and in teaming up with other districts, with NPDL being a prime example.
- The essence of this LftM work consists of *innovation and dissemination*. Having established a basic instructional capacity in implementing literacy, many schools and districts are now going deeper into new pedagogies that engage students and teachers in real-life problems.
- This model of change is one that Maria Langworthy and I formulated in *A Rich Seam*. We described the process as: "Directional vision, letting go, and reining in."[7] Clearly this represents a dynamic model, but it also requires a degree of "discipline." First, directional vision shapes the direction (our NPDL definition for example); second, letting go encourages people to do new things within the broad new direction. We are currently

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Du choc des idées jaillit la lumière

Leading from the Middle unleashes badly needed innovation on a large scale while at the same time helping to assess and sort out what should be retained and spread.

documenting examples of this work in action as students and teachers, for example, are tackling local problems and working together to come up with innovative solutions; third, reining in is built into the process of co-learning. Again we are documenting what this looks like but it consists of the use of targeted questions and protocols to arrive at new meaning and new assessment.[8] Because the model is laden with transparency, precision of action, assessment of what is being learned including outcomes, and continuous exchanges and deliberation, good ideas get sorted out and retained. This is not a linear model but more or less simultaneous. It generates and assesses a great deal of innovation. These ideas can be further sorted in relation to provincial frameworks and assessments.

In NPDL we are assessing, capturing and spreading what is being learned. It sounds messy and to a certain extent it is, but it promises to produce better ideas, more quickly, with greater local capacity and ownership. At the same time, this is played out within an overall mindset that we have called "systemness": a commitment to contributing to, and benefitting from, the larger system. LftM cultivates activities and co-learning that constantly place people in the context of interaction at their own level, and also beyond it as ideas are sorted out in regional, provincial, and in the case of NPDL, international exchanges.

In short, NPDL is a strong, specific example of LftM oriented to innovation and the future of learning.

The promise of LftM

It is crucial to say that every time the middle gets together, it is not automatically a good thing. We referred earlier to our eight criteria for collaboration.[9] Thus having a strong moral purpose focus, working on deep new pedagogies and learning outcomes, affecting the whole system, and so on, are all essential components.

LftM is a new concept, and has not been fully tested and assessed. But there are at least three big reasons why it holds great promise:

1. It appeals instantly to a critical mass of people who want a role and have hitherto not been able to see where they fit. When people become aware of LftM ideas they quickly identify with its potential because it is a strategy that finally gives people in the middle a prominent role to play.
2. It can be used in a variety of ways and is especially suited to breakthrough innovations that are so sorely lacking in public school systems. Traditional school systems have become stodgy and boring for students and for educators. LftM enables and unleashes badly needed innovation on a large scale while at the same time helping to assess and sort out what should be retained and spread.
3. By definition, it implicates the whole system starting from the middle out, up and down. In addition to our system-use of the concept, LftM can and should be used at other levels. Schools, for example are the middle if you use a within-district focus. Teachers, students and families are the middle when you think of intra-school and community work.

Conclusion

Governments have become less and less effective at leading system change.

The old model - prioritize and implement - is no longer suitable. It cannot generate innovation and learning fast enough for the demands of the 21st century. For the latter you need continuous innovation in real time generated and assessed through co-learning (laterally within and across classrooms, schools and districts; and hierarchically school to district to province). For this kind of innovation, the middle is essential.

Learning from the Middle represents a new and powerful way of thinking that frees us from outdated and limited models that depend on top-down versus bottom-up thinking. It liberates a greater mass of people to become engaged in purposeful system change, and ultimately to own the changes that they create together. EC

NOTES

1 L. Earl, M. Fullan, K. Leithwood, and N. Watson, *Watching & Learning: OISE/UT evaluation of the national literacy and numeracy strategies* (London, England: Department for Education and Skills, 2003).

2 M. Fullan, "Big Ideas Behind Whole System Reform," *Education Canada* 50, No. 3 (2010): 24-27.

3 M. Fullan and S. Rincon-Gallardo, "Developing High Quality Education in Canada: The case of Ontario," in Adamson, Astrand, and Darling-Hammond, Eds., (London: Routledge, in press).

4 A. Hargreaves and H. Braun, *Leading for All* (Ontario: Council of Ontario Directors of Education, 2010). www.ontariodirectors.ca/downloads/Essential_FullReport_Final.pdf

5 New Zealand Education Institute, Ministry of Education, *Joint Initiative Agreement* (Wellington NZ: 2015).

6 S. Rincon-Gallardo and M. Fullan, "Essential Features of Effective Networks and Professional Collaboration," *Journal of Professional Capital and Community* (in press).

7 M. Fullan and M. Langworthy, *A Rich Seam: How new pedagogies find deep learning* (London: Pearson, 2014), 48.

8 M. Fullan, "Leadership in a Digital Age," Presentation at the *Deep Learning Hub* (October, 2015). www.npdl.global

9 See also our "coherence framework": M. Fullan and J. Quinn, *Coherence: Putting the right drivers in action* (Thousand Oakes, CA: Corwin Press, 2015).