The Self-Improving System in England:
a Review of Evidence and Thinking

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Executive summary

The debate over 'what works' in education reform has intensified in the past decade, fuelled by the increasing importance of international surveys such as PISA. The limitations of top down reform are widely recognised, leading to arguments for tri-level reform (aligning action between the centre, the local and the school). Professor Michael Barber sees decentralisation – or 'unleashing greatness' – as the end point of a process: you should not consider it unless you have first dragged up standards of performance from 'awful' to 'adequate' through centralised action and then built capacity to achieve 'Good'.

The 'self-improving system' has emerged as a central theme for the Coalition's approach. It is an evolving policy, but reflects Michael Barber's model in some respects. The related concept of a 'school-led' system has very different connotations, although the two terms are often used interchangeably.

The Coalition's broad approach is to maximise autonomy whilst raising the accountability bar for schools, increase diversity and choice for parents and reduce the role of central and local government where possible. International research does suggest that increasing school autonomy leads to small gains in performance, but England's schools were already amongst the most autonomous in the world even before the expansion of academies so any additional gains may be minimal. England's accountability model is seen to have some strengths, insofar as it clarifies expectations and incentivises self-evaluation by schools, but some argue that the push to reduce all other forms of support for schools has made Ofsted overly dominant.

The Coalition focus on increasing choice, for example through free schools, reflects a wider commitment to quasi-markets as a means of securing improvement. International evidence indicates that the impact of markets in education is small and that this impact is differential: some students and schools benefit while others suffer. Quasi-markets do appear to affect the behaviour of schools, but they do not seem to encourage schools to improve the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms: this is because the parents who are the most active 'choosers' are generally more concerned with the social and racial composition of schools than with the quality of teaching.

The success or failure of the self-improving system is increasingly seen to be dependent on the development of deep partnerships between schools. This is intended to mitigate the risk of stand-alone schools failing and to address systemic challenges that cannot be addressed by single schools competing against each other. However, deep partnerships based on trust and reciprocity are hard to develop and maintain in quasi-market systems, particularly if they are to provide hard-edged peer challenge to participating schools. A range of partnership and system leadership models have developed, with varying levels of evidence of impact. Evidence on the impact of partnerships is still emerging, but strong governance and executive leadership across partnerships appears to be important.

Assessing overall progress on the self-improving system is challenging. The 2012 PISA results suggested that England's performance against international comparators has continued to flatline. Ofsted's 2012-13 and 2013-14 annual reports both signalled improvements, but also flagged concerns, including: evidence that some 'isolated' academies appear to be struggling; that system leadership capacity to provide school-to-school support remains patchy; and that reforms to initial teacher education (ITE) are leading to teacher shortages and cherry picking by stronger schools. Few studies are assessing the ways in which attitudes and practices are evolving on the ground, although Peter Earley and Rob Higham's research suggested that headteachers fall into one of four categories – confident, cautious, concerned and constrained (Earley and Higham, 2012). Research with 'well-positioned' headteachers (ie from schools that are Ofsted 'good' or 'outstanding') suggests they see the world as increasingly hierarchical – indicating the risk of a two-tier system in which the weak get weaker and the strong get stronger. However, a recent study of local authority (LA) areas found that confidence and commitment to partnership working was growing amongst school leaders, although confidence in the capacity of local systems to meet the needs of vulnerable children was less strong.

International evidence is clear that successful school systems are equitable systems, yet research shows that England's schools have become more socially segregated over time. The evidence that the Pupil Premium is proving effective in closing the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers is still emerging, although children on Free School Meals (FSM) did improve faster than their non-FSM peers in the 2014 Key Stage 2 results, giving some grounds for optimism.

This review concludes by highlighting four issues that the ASCL blueprint might address:

How to enhance evidence-informed improvement and high-quality professional development?

The self-improving system may have unleashed a flood of innovation within individual schools, yet the loss of national and local infrastructure for collating and sharing 'what works' coupled with the reduced national investment in research means that the flow of rigorous evidence between schools and localities remains haphazard. English schools are generally poor at providing high-quality and sustained CPD for staff, and while the current focus on school-led Joint Practice Development has benefits, it may not have the evidence-based rigour, which characterises the best development. The need for a self-improving system to be evidence-based is increasingly well recognised, but the research and development role of Teaching Schools is generally seen as the weakest strand and the understanding of how evidence is mobilised to

influence practice across schools remains weak. Universities could play a role here, but the number of serving teachers and leaders undertaking masters degrees is falling and most school-university partnerships remain fragile.

How to increase school capacity and manage workload?

The fact that increasing school autonomy leads to increased workload for the leaders and staff within those schools is well understood, but the impact of the current model may make these pressures unmanageable, particularly if school funding reduces after the election. The impact of sharp accountability coupled with limited institutional support plays into this, with reports of school leadership stress and burnout increasing and high numbers of headteachers leaving the profession due to poor Ofsted judgements.

How to align incentives for school and system leaders?

Forming deep partnerships is challenging, so there is a need to ensure that the incentives for system leadership are maximised and the barriers to partnership working are reduced. One option may be for Ofsted to move away from focussing on school-level accountability towards a model that holds partnerships of schools to account for the quality of support and challenge they provide each other.

How to make local systems work for all children without losing leadership agency?

This remains perhaps the hardest nut to crack: how to ensure that every school has appropriate challenge and support and that systemic challenges are addressed, within an organisational structure that does not re-impose bureaucracy? In a self-improving system, the aim must be to incentivise leaders to shape their own local solutions without compromising on equity. Yet levels of capacity and engagement in school-to-school support differ by region. While the new Regional Schools Commissioners and elected Headteacher Boards (HTBs) may help take the pressure of oversight for academies off Whitehall, questions remain around whether conflicts of interest can be managed and accusations of producer-capture avoided.

The ASCL blueprint has the potential to provide a future focussed and compelling vision for a self-improving system. In order to do so, it must address these challenges to ensure that the needs of all children are met and to avoid the risk of a two-tier system.

Introduction

The debate over 'what works' in educational reform has intensified in the past decade. This has largely been a result of international assessments such as PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS, which have both raised the stakes (by revealing stark differences in performance between countries) and enabled more sophisticated comparative studies exploring how and why these differences have arisen (Barber and Mourshed, 2007; Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber, 2010; Fullan, 2010; Jensen, Hunter, Sonnemann and Burns, 2012).

These debates have become intertwined with discussions around how education should adapt to reflect both the opportunities provided by new technologies and the needs of learning and learners in the 21st Century. Some commentators argue that the 'factory model' of schooling is no longer fit for purpose. Although they take different perspectives, the thrust of their argument is that national reform efforts focussed on driving up achievement using a narrowly-defined set of assessments and performance management approaches ('targets, testing and tables'), will simply lead to perverse outcomes that do not increase the chances of every child achieving their potential. Instead these commentators argue in different ways for disruptive innovation and transformational change based on a reconceptualisation of learning, teaching and schooling (Leadbeater and Wong, 2010; Hargreaves and Shirley, 2011; Sahlberg, 2011; Zhao, 2012; Caldwell and Spinks, 2013).

Meanwhile, an influential group of commentators in the US and England have argued that progressive constructivist notions of 'content-free' learning have failed: instead they argue that children need access to core content knowledge (in particular those from culturally deprived backgrounds) taught utilising traditional 'chalk and talk' pedagogy where necessary (Hirsch, 1996).

England's shift towards a 'self-improving' school system inevitably sits in the context of these wider debates. The Coalition's core focus on 'high-autonomy-and-high-accountability' has parallels in a number of other systems, although it is arguable that the model has a number of distinctive features. Meanwhile, the sheer scale of reform underway across almost every aspect of the education system makes England an extreme example in international terms.

This brief literature review is intended to inform the ASCL blueprint. The blueprint looks ahead to assess what a mature self-improving school-led system might look like. It is ambitious in its scope, encompassing almost every aspect of the school system from curriculum, to professional development to accountability (see **www.ascl.org.uk/news-and-views/news_news-detail.what-does-a-self-improving-system-look-like.html** for details).

This review explores evidence and thinking on self-improving school systems as well as related concepts such as school improvement, autonomy, markets, choice and collaboration. These areas all have significant literatures associated with them, so this review draws on existing reviews and syntheses where possible whilst recognising the risks and limitations of covering so much ground in a short paper. It also summarises evidence of progress to date on the self-improving system in England, although this evidence is inevitably partial.

The structure of this review is as follows:

● Defining a self-improving system in policy and practice.

● Evidence on school autonomy and accountability.

● Evidence on quasi-markets and parental choice.

● Evidence on school collaboration and partnerships.

● Evidence on current progress and issues in England.

● Conclusion.

Defining the 'self-improving system' in policy and practice

Almost by definition, the 'self-improving system' is a concept that continues to emerge in terms of both policy and practice. *The Importance of Teaching* white paper (Department for Education, 2010) stated that, 'The primary responsibility for improvement rests with schools… Our aim should be to create a school system which is more effectively self-improving.'

Over time, the concept of a 'self-improving system' has arguably become the defining feature of the Coalition's approach. For example, the merged National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) was "created to enable and support the development of a self-improving, school-led system," (although the addition of 'school-led' alongside 'self-improving' here is notable, since the two things are not necessarily the same). Charlie Taylor, the Chief Executive of NCTL, has said he wants to achieve an "irrevocable shift" towards a self-improving system by September 2016 (North of England speech, 2014).

The fact that the 'self-improving system' has become so central may have come as rather a surprise to the authors of the white paper: a simple word search of the document shows that the phrase 'self-improving' appears just twice, compared to 147 mentions for 'academy' and 'academies', 36 mentions apiece for 'free schools' and 'autonomy', 19 mentions for 'freedom' and five mentions for 'world-class'. Tellingly, 'self-improving' does not appear in either of the two forewords (by David Cameron/Nick Clegg and Michael Gove respectively) which set out the overall reform vision. The 2010 Conservative manifesto does not mention the 'self-improving system' at all.

One way to define a 'self-improving' system is to ask how it differs from any other sort of 'improving' system. The US Glossary of Education Reform website defines systemic reform/improvement as follows:

1 Reforms that impact multiple levels of the education system.

2 Reforms that aspire to make changes throughout a defined system.

3 Reforms that are intended to influence, in minor or significant ways, every student and staff member in a school or system.

4 Reforms that may vary widely in design and purpose, but that nevertheless reflect a consistent educational philosophy or that are aimed at achieving common objectives.

Clearly, system improvement in this definition is a process of top-down, policy-driven reform. More sophisticated evolutions of this recognise the limitations of a purely top-down approach, and so advocate tri-level reform that aligns action between the centre, the local and the school (Fullan, 2005). Levin (2012) builds on the idea of tri-level reform to argue that successful policies must co-construct change with front-line practitioners so that every layer of the system is committed to a shared vision:

> If we have learned anything over recent decades about large-scale improvement in education, it is that reforms 'done to the system' do not have the desired effects. The evidence, not just from education, but also more generally, is that reform strategies must be explained and implemented in ways that engage the idealism and professional commitments of (in this case) educators.

Research on high performing jurisdictions in East Asia appears to back Levin's assertion: successful reforms there do combine top-down and bottom-up reform (Jensen, Hunter, Sonnemann, and Burns, 2012; Jensen and Clark, 2013). Closer to home, although the precise combination of factors that made the London Challenge successful are still hotly debated, it remains England's most successful example of systematic reform and was undoubtedly achieved through a combination of top down and bottom up factors (Ofsted, 2010; Rudd, Poet and Featherstone, 2011; Hutchings et al, 2012; Baars et al, 2014; Greaves et al, 2014).

The Importance of Teaching emphatically rejects a top-down approach, arguing that 'the attempt to secure automatic compliance with central government initiatives reduces the capacity of the school system to improve itself'. At the simplest level, a self-improving system can be characterised as one that is the opposite of a top-down centrally directed system.

Based on an analysis of the white paper and related documents (such as Goldacre, 2013), Greany (2014) suggests that the Coalition has four core criteria for the self-improving system:

● Teachers and schools are responsible for their own improvement.

● Teachers and schools learn from each other and from research so that effective practice spreads.

● The best schools and leaders extend their reach across other schools so that all schools improve.

● Government support and intervention is minimised.

While aspects of this approach can be seen as innovative in global terms, in particular the focus on system leadership and school-to-school support as the primary mechanism for improvement, it is also true that the Coalition's approach builds on many of New Labour's foundations. In fact, many commentators point towards a broad cross-party consensus in education policy since the 1988 Education Reform Act, or ERA (Glatter, 2013). The act increased school decision-making autonomy over areas such as the use of resources and day-to-day management whilst increasing parental choice over which school their child attended. It also increased national oversight through the development of a National Curriculum, assessment and accountability regime. This neo-liberal model (informed by New Public Management) is based on the premise that system performance will improve if individual schools are responsible and accountable for their own performance, and are driven to compete with each other in a quasi-market (Caldwell, 2013).

In some respects, the self-improving system can be seen as an effort to take the ERA reforms to their natural conclusion: by making academies wholly autonomous and severing the role of local authorities (LAs) altogether, it enables the quasi-market to operate more effectively. At the same time, the moves to reduce the quangos and levels of bureaucracy and thereby free up the profession can be seen as an attempt to mitigate some of the negative impacts of New Public Management, which can narrow conceptions of learning and lead professionals to jump through hoops (Ball, 2003).

In practice, the success or otherwise of decentralisation to schools will depend on the conditions in which it is introduced. New Zealand is a reasonably good performer in terms PISA overall, but with significant challenges in terms of equity and gaps (Caldwell and Spinks, 2014). It introduced a radical policy of school-based management in 1988, which has been tracked over the subsequent 25 years by Cathy Wylie from the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (2013). In her view:

> *The radical reform announced by David Lange (New Zealand Minister for Education in 1988) has struggled to really improve educational opportunities. Schools lost connections with one another. Because the reforms emphasised parental choice of schools, on the basis of the assumption that competition for students would sharpen school practice, schools were often reluctant to share their knowledge and teaching resources. School clusters did not emerge without additional Ministry funding, and often they have lasted only as long as that funding.*

Such findings have led Michael Barber (2007) to see decentralisation – or 'unleashing greatness' - as the end point of a process: ie you should not consider it unless you have first dragged up standards of performance from 'awful' to 'adequate' and then built capacity to achieve 'good' through centralised action (See Figure 1). In his words:

> *You can mandate to get the system from awful to adequate but not from adequate to great. To do that you have to unleash potential and creativity. This cannot be centrally mandated but has to be locally enabled.*

In Barber's model, greatness is unleashed when you trust school leaders and teachers to drive improvement and innovation. If sufficient capacity has been built then the difficulties faced by New Zealand will be avoided: profession-driven improvement will remain evidence-informed and consistent so that all children benefit.

The question is how can such high levels of professionalism be developed? The medical model is often cited as an example, where the Royal Colleges maintain professional standards without input from Health ministers of any political colour (Berwick and Matthews, 2013; Prince's Teaching Institute, 2014). Of course, the medical profession evolved over several hundred years and has followed a very different trajectory to that described by Barber. In fact the more recent government-driven efforts to make nursing a graduate-level profession, with an initial training model that bears some resemblance to School Direct (as well as a number of important differences), might be more illustrative. The current DfE (2014d) consultation on 'A world-class teaching profession' appears to recognise that the profession is not yet sufficiently developed to enable its own improvement, particularly in the area of continuous professional development (CPD), and so proposes to kick-start a new Royal College of Teaching.

David Hargreaves has done more than anyone to think through the conditions required for a successful self-improving system (Hargreaves, 2010, 2011, 2012a, 2012b). He argues that we must move beyond the existing architecture of single self-managing schools by putting in place four 'building blocks':

● Clusters of schools (the structure).

● The local solutions approach and co-construction (the two cultural elements).

● System leaders (the key people).

Hargreaves argues that clusters – or families – of schools working together in deep partnerships can realise benefits that individual self-managing schools cannot. For example, they can meet a wider range of student and teacher needs; facilitate innovation and knowledge transfer; deal effectively with special educational needs; share capacity and manage change; achieve efficiencies of scale and build leadership capacity and succession. (Evidence on the impact of partnerships is covered in a later section).

Hargreaves recognises that most school partnerships are shallow and loose, meaning these benefits will not be realised. Over the course of two years, he worked with schools to define what he saw as the four core strategies that system leaders might prioritise in order to build successful deep partnerships. They are as follows:

- Foster Joint Practice Development as the key mechanism for professional staff learning within and between schools in the partnership.

- Through this process, consciously build social capital and trust within and between schools in the partnership.

- Over time, find ways to ensure that all stakeholders, including students, develop a sense of collective moral purpose (meaning that they care about the performance of other schools and children and young people in the partnership as much as their own).

- Finally, and most challengingly, In order to avoid the partnership becoming cosy and self-referential, peer evaluation and challenge must be practised at every level within and between schools.

In summary, the 'self-improving system' has emerged as a central theme for the Coalition's approach, but is not a fully articulated policy for school reform. Rather, it is a loose concept that encapsulates wider commitments to maximise school autonomy, increase diversity and choice for parents and reduce the role of central and local government where possible. Inevitably, the policy framework for the self-improving system has continued to evolve in line with the concept itself. For example, School Direct, which is often used by ministers as an emblem of progress on the self-improving system, was not even conceived at the time of the White Paper.

Largely thanks to the work of David Hargreaves, the success or failure of a self-improving system is now seen by the DfE and others (House of Commons Education Select Committee, 2013; DfE, 2014a) to be dependent on the development of deep partnerships between schools. It is hoped that this will mitigate the risk of significant numbers of stand-alone schools failing and will increase capacity for addressing systemic challenges – such as leadership succession planning – that cannot be addressed by single schools competing against each other.

However, Greany (2014) argues that a number of Coalition policies contradict the aim for deep partnerships of schools and that this has created tensions for school leaders on the ground. For example, NCTL-funded research on Teaching School business models by Deloitte (Glover et al, 2014) shows that they are caught between three different drivers that frequently pull them in different directions: the need to deliver on the policy priorities set for them by government (the 'Big 6'); the need to make sufficient income to be financially viable; and the need to meet the real needs of other schools.

Figure 1: Michael Barber's framework for system reform and improvement

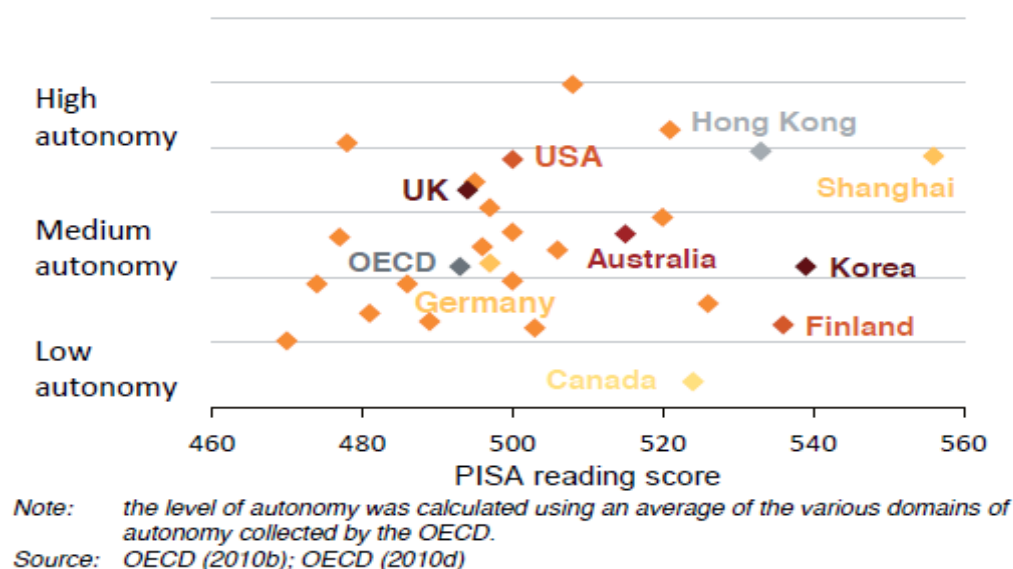|	**Awful to adequate**	**Adequate to good**	**Good to great**
Role of government	Tackling under performance Prescribing	Transparency Building capacity	World-class expectations Unleashing greatness
Role of profession	Implementing Adopting minimum standards	Evidence-based Adopting best practice	Evidence-driven Consistency and innovation
Relationship	Top down Antagonistic	Negotiated Pragmatic	Principled Strategic partnership
Public perception	"You should have done that years ago"	"We'll believe it when we see it"	"You've got it, finally"

School autonomy and accountability

The 2010 Schools White Paper stated that, 'Across the world, the case for the benefits of school autonomy has been established beyond doubt' (DfE, 2010, para 5.1). The Coalition has overseen a massive increase in the number of academies (state funded schools that are independent of their LA and with increased freedoms) in England, from less than 200 before 2010, to almost 4,000 by July 2014 (DfE, 2014b). Michael Gove, the former Secretary of State, was clear in his belief that increasing autonomy through academies would lead to direct improvements in outcomes for children:

> (Academies) will be free of any government interference, free to hire whoever they want, pay them whatever they want, teach whatever they want, and as a result we can demand higher standards.

International research on the impact of increasing school autonomy does indicate that it is associated with a small gain in performance (Jensen, Weidmann, and Farmer, 2013; Schleicher, 2012), although a number of high-performing jurisdictions (such as Finland and Korea) have only medium or low levels of school autonomy (see Chart 1). The most recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) review in this area (TALIS, 2014) certainly provides a more nuanced conclusion than the white paper statement would suggest:

> A general reading of the research seems to show that greater levels of autonomy for schools would… improve learning outcomes. However, upon closer inspection, it is evident that the impact of school autonomy on student achievement varies across countries (Hanushek, Link and Woessman, 2013). The kinds of decisions that are devolved also make a difference; some studies show the importance of curricula and assessment decisions being made at school level (OECD, 2010) while others emphasise the benefits of process and personnel decisions being decentralised (Woessman, 2007).

Chart 1: Performance in PISA 2009 and level of autonomy in the system

Note: the level of autonomy was calculated using an average of the various domains of
          autonomy collected by the OECD.
Source: OECD (2010b); OECD (2010d)

In practice, defining autonomy consistently across different contexts can be challenging. For example, in one system, school leaders may say they have responsibility for hiring and firing staff, but due to national pay arrangements or employment legislation they may, in fact, have less ability to exercise their freedoms than leaders in another system.

Therefore, it is important to focus on how leaders actually use their autonomy, rather than just what decision making rights they have. Jensen's study (2013) on performance management practices is illuminating in this respect. He compared very low autonomy schools (ie usually publicly maintained) with very high autonomy schools (ie independent schools) across a range of jurisdictions, using teachers' responses to the OECD TALIS survey in 2009. He found remarkably few differences between the two types of school, with teachers in both types of schools saying that performance management, appraisal and reward are not linked to performance. The only significant difference was in the higher propensity of high autonomy schools to fire poorly performing teachers, but even here it was only just over a third that did so (10 per cent in low autonomy schools compared to 36 per cent in high autonomy schools).

The push to increase the number of academies might suggest that schools in England previously lacked the freedoms enjoyed by schools in other jurisdictions. This is not the case: PISA 2009 showed that schools in the UK were among the most autonomous in the world (OECD, 2011), perhaps not surprisingly since this has been an explicit objective of policy since the ERA (Caldwell and Spinks, 2013).

The most recent evidence – from the OECD's TALIS survey conducted in 2013 - does not suggest that the Coalition's efforts to increase autonomy and reduce government interference are working yet. The report on the findings from England states that:

English headteachers clearly have more autonomy than heads in many other countries and yet they also are more likely to identify excessive government regulation as a barrier.

Similarly, the evidence that academies are using their increased autonomy to innovate the ways in which schools are led or that student learning is supported is limited. The Academies Commission report (Gilbert *et al*, 2013) found that the 'use of the specific academy freedoms has not been widespread' (see also Reform/SSAT, 2012 and 2014 and National College, 2011). However, the most recent DfE annual report on academies and a recent DfE survey (DfE, 2014b and 2014c) include a number of case studies of academies that have used their freedoms, perhaps indicating that change will simply take time to feed through.

Both the DfE and OECD agree that autonomy must be combined with accountability to be effective (DfE, 2014b; OECD, 2011 and 2013, p192). The challenge is how to design accountability systems that incentivise appropriate improvement efforts by schools. England's model based on Ofsted inspections is seen to have some strengths compared to alternative models, insofar as it clarifies expectations and incentivises self-evaluation by schools (Baxter and Ehren, 2014). However, the downsides of a punitive accountability regime are well documented: it can flatten the very freedom and autonomy that governments want to encourage (Dunford *et al*, 2012); schools can teach to the test; they can look up to second guess what they think the inspectorate wants to see (rather than at the evidence base); and they can game the system by changing the socio-economic nature of their intake or by massaging their exam performance through various subtle tricks (Waldegrave and Simons, 2014; Sahlberg, 2008).

Greany (2014) argues that the growing number of questions about whether or not Ofsted's inspection model is robust (Coe, 2014; Old, 2014) and whether or not it is politically impartial (The Guardian, 3.2.14) may indicate that it has become too dominant as a force for change and regulation in the English system. He argues that, in the process, this has created an unhealthy level of friction between national policy makers and the school leaders charged with securing improvement on the ground. For example, Earley and Higham's survey of headteachers for the National College for School Leadership (Earley and Higham, 2012) found that only 22 per cent were strongly positive about current government policy.

Quasi-markets and parental choice

Schools in England have competed with each other for many years, partly as a result of the move towards increased school autonomy described above. Other policy mechanisms have explicitly encouraged such competition, including parental choice of schools and the publication of school performance data in order to help parents make informed choices.

Certainly, competition and co-operation can and do co-exist in most sectors and are not mutually exclusive. Some commentators see 'positive competition' as essential for continuous improvement (Fullan, 2010), although overall school leaders are generally less positive about policies that encourage competition and prefer those that encourage collaboration (Earley and Higham, 2012).

A review of the development of quasi-markets in secondary education in England (Institute for Government, 2012) highlights the ways in which they differ from pure markets: providers are not necessarily profit-making, choice may be exercised on behalf of the user, and 'spending power' is determined by the state rather than by the user's wealth. The review posits two broad justifications for quasi-markets: that competition will drive out inefficient state monopolies and will enable innovation and improvement. Using a framework developed by Allen and Burgess (2010) the authors track the progress of policies in England and conclude that:

> Movement towards a quasi-market in secondary education has been gradual, uneven, piecemeal, sometimes inadvertent and subject to trial, error and adaptation. Policy-makers have wavered between promoting competition and cooperation, sometimes moving further away from a quasi-market system. Michael Gove's emphasis on promoting cooperation has been particularly significant.

The view that Michael Gove's policies contradict the trend towards greater marketisation is interesting. It certainly seems to underplay the role of policies on free schools, studio schools and University Technical Colleges (UTCs), which have been explicitly designed to increase choice for parents and to increase competitive pressure on under-performing schools. Dominic Cummings, Michael Gove's Special Adviser throughout most of his period in office, was undoubtedly a strong advocate for stronger market-pressures. He wrote in late 2013:

> Hopefully, recent reforms will push the English system towards one in which the state provides a generous amount of funding per pupil which parents can spend in any school they wish…while the DfE does little more than some regulatory, accountancy, and due diligence functions… Many dislike the idea of schools 'going bankrupt'…but the evidence from post-Katrina New Orleans is that despite extreme disruption children have benefited from bad schools being forced to close.

The debate on potential ways to enhance market-mechanisms in education remains vibrant and this is likely to be a key theme in the forthcoming manifestos. For example, the Centre for Market Reform in Education and Adam Smith Institute (Croft, Sahlgren and Howes, 2013) recently published a paper arguing for the introduction of vouchers.

The question here is whether increased market-mechanisms would support the development of a self-improving system of schools.

A recent summary of research on competition and markets in education for the OECD (Waslander, Pater, and van der Weide, 2010) concluded that "The effects of market mechanisms in education are small, if they are found at all." Furthermore, the impact is often differential: some students and schools may experience positive effects while others may face the opposite.

The reviewers go on to ask why this might be case. On the demand side, they look at the evidence on how different groups of parents make choices about schools, and whether improving the quality of information available to parents (for example through Ofsted reports) changes their decisions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they find that middle class parents tend to be more active 'choosers' than their working class peers. More importantly, it is the social composition of the school (and, less consistently, the racial composition) that appears to matter more to the choosers than the quality of teaching and learning per se. Public performance indicators such as Ofsted reports can be helpful in this context (by signalling quality issues), but the reputation of a school in the minds of local parents is less closely tied to its performance in league tables or Ofsted inspections than might be expected. For example, the PISA 2009 parental questionnaire (cited in Waslander *et al*, 2010) showed that parents value 'academic achievement' **lower than** 'a safe environment', 'school climate' and 'reputation'.

On the supply side, it seems that there is a threshold level for competition, above which schools start to alter their behaviour. Urban areas are more likely to exceed this threshold than rural ones. A number of studies indicate that local hierarchies of schools exist, from the most to the least popular, and it is schools in the middle of these hierarchies that face the greatest competition. Schools at different ends of these hierarchies tend to respond differently to competitive pressures, but the dominant response is for schools to try to control their intake by attracting the most 'desirable' students. This might involve anything from increasing marketing spend to developing attractive new facilities.

Finally, there are significant logistical issues to be overcome before competition can change supply side behaviour: even if a successful school wants to expand, it may not have the space to do so, meaning that matching supply and demand is challenging. The original rationale for free schools in England was that they would operate in the context of surplus places overall (Sturdy and Freedman, 2007; Freedman and Meyland-Smith, 2009), thereby helping to address such capacity issues. In practice, this has proved politically difficult in the context of wider austerity and rising pupil numbers in primary.

Overall then, competition and markets do appear to affect the behaviour of schools, but they do not tend to encourage schools to improve the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms. Andreas Schleicher, Deputy Education Director of the OECD, emphasised this message at the launch of the 2012 PISA results:

> *Competition alone is not a predictor for better outcomes…The UK is a good example – it has a highly competitive school system but it is still only an average performer.*

Collaboration and partnerships

System leadership and school-to-school support are one of the few Labour policy innovations that the coalition has continued and expanded (DfE, 2013a and b; Education Select Committee, 2013). The key models in place include structural governance models (such as multi-academy trusts (MATs) and federations), designations based on formal criteria (such as National Leaders of Education and Teaching Schools) and role related partnerships (such as where an executive head oversees two or more schools). It is arguable that school-to-school support is now the primary mechanism for school improvement in England (Sandals and Bryant, 2014; Earley and Higham, 2012).

It is important to recognise how significant the shift in policy and practice has been in this area over the last decade (Higham, Hopkins, and Matthews, 2009). Ten years ago, the policy focus in England, as elsewhere, was on retaining the stock of good and great school leaders in their existing schools, whilst attempting to address weak leadership in other schools through leadership development programmes and other types of school improvement intervention, such as 'fresh starts' and academies. System leaders, insofar as they existed, were 'super heads'; parachuted into failing schools to turn them round, with varying degrees of success and limited sustainability once the 'super head' moved on (Dimmock and Walker, 2002). Yet by the time of the 2010 white paper, a quarter of all headteachers reported that they had undertaken a significant system leadership role (Hill, 2011 and NCSL, 2010).

This shift in policy and practice towards supporting collaboration has occurred despite a relatively thin evidence base (House of Commons Education Select Committee, 2013)**.** In their review of the evidence, Muijs et al (2010) identify differential effects in different areas: they summarise the evidence as:

● strongest (but moderate) that collaboration can widen opportunities and help address vulnerable groups of learners

● moderate that collaboration is effective in helping solve immediate problems

● modest to weak that it is effective in raising expectations

How did collaboration and school-to-school support emerge as a central tenet of the self-improving system given the limited evidence base? A key factor was the experience of leaders in the London Challenge, where headteachers of the most successful schools were persuaded to support the 'keys to success' schools that needed most improvement. These 'consultant heads' didn't work alone; they drew on the capacity and resources of the staff in their home schools to support the weaker schools. The rationale for this approach was that support from credible, serving leaders and teachers is more effective than that from external consultants (Hill and Matthews, 2008 and 2010; CfBT, 2014). The process of providing support to a struggling school can also provide a powerful learning opportunity for the staff in the successful school, thereby enhancing their own practice (Ofsted, 2010). The model was scaled up by the National College for School Leadership from 2006 onwards through the National Leaders of Education/National Support Schools (NLE) initiative. The evidence so far indicates that the approach has continued to prove effective at scale. Outcomes improve faster in NLE-supported schools than in a matched sample (NCTL, 2013), while NLEs also increase the rate of improvement for children on FSM in supported schools (Rea, Hill, and Sandals, 2011; Rea, Hill, and Dunford, 2013).

Other system leadership models involve a more permanent relationship between two or more schools. Federations and executive heads were made possible through Labour's 2002 legislation, but it took many years for the model to reach significant scale (NCSL, 2010). Muijs and Chapman's (2009 and 2011) research for the National College indicated a positive federation effect on pupil outcomes over time, most significantly in the case of 'performance federations' (ie strong and weak schools together) and where an executive head was in place.

Academy chains, generally under the aegis of a MAT, have emerged rapidly as the dominant structural model for school-to-school support. Coalition minister Lord Nash is clear that the government sees MATs as the best way to secure improvement, largely because they ensure that accountability for performance lies firmly with the trust (House of Commons Education Select Committee, 2013). The Coalition has played an active role in brokering under-performing schools into academy chains, generally run by successful schools, although the number of higher performing schools that choose to form or join such a chain voluntarily is rising. By 2014, more than half of all academies were in a chain, and more than 60 per cent of primary academies (DfE, 2014).

Robert Hill's reports on academy chains (Hill, 2009 and Hill et al, 2012) flagged some of the challenges for policy and practice in this area: most obviously the rapid pace of growth in some of the larger chains that risked the quality and success of the initiative. Ofsted's 2013 annual report drew out the evidence of impact from sponsored academy chains, which chimed with Hill's (2012) analysis that they appear to be making a positive difference in the most challenging schools. Preliminary analysis of five sponsored academy chains by Chapman and Muijs (2012) indicates that those with a more centralised operating model appear to be improving faster. Most recently, analysis by Hutchings, Francis and De Vries for the Sutton Trust has shown that whilst academy chains do appear to be improving outcomes for the most disadvantaged schools, performance between chains is highly variable (Hutchings, Francis and De Vries 2014). Salokangas and Chapman (2014) use case studies of two academy chains to illustrate the very different ways in which governance and leadership models can evolve, with differing balances in terms of central and local school-level control and resulting differences in culture and approaches to school improvement.

The Importance of Teaching white paper set out an ambition for 500 Teaching Schools by 2015, 'outstanding' schools with a strong role in co-ordinating initial and continuing professional development, school-to-school support and Research and Development across an alliance of partner schools (Matthews and Berwick, 2013). By June 2014 587 Teaching Schools had been designated. The interim evaluation of Teaching Schools (Gu et al 2014), which was based on case study visits to 18 alliances in the summer of 2013, reflects considerable progress overall. It also indicates the sheer diversity of organisational forms and approaches emerging. Gu et al note the strong moral purpose that drives the alliance leaders to make a difference for all children, as well as the strongly inter-personal and network-based nature of development. Despite this finding, the perception among some schools that Teaching Schools and academy sponsors are little more than 'empire builders' remains strong (Wheatley and Stone, 2013; Greany and Allan, forthcoming).

Gu et al also flag a series of challenges for the Teaching School model, ranging from the unreasonable and unsustainable workload required to establish the alliances, to a lack of robust peer challenge between partner schools:

> *Teaching schools appear to have been doing the softer working around support and development, but not been able to hold each other to account (or other schools in the alliance) if performance and progress starts to slip in a school.*

This finding reflects one of the key challenges for policies focussed on building capacity through school-to-school collaboration. Deep partnerships based on trust and reciprocity are extremely hard to develop and maintain, particularly if they are to provide hard-edged peer challenge to participating schools (Hargreaves, 2012). The OECD (Waslander, Pater, and van der Weide, 2010) sees partnership working between schools as constantly vulnerable to competitive pressures in quasi-market systems: if one school in the partnership starts to act competitively (or is perceived to act competitively), then the other schools will feel pressurised to do the same. Therefore, such partnerships need to be constantly reinvigorated and affirmed to ensure that they add value. This links to related debates around the extent to which partnerships need to develop strong governance mechanisms that can provide solidity and move them beyond personal commitment from individual leaders.

Current progress and issues for the self-improving system in England

Assessing progress on the self-improving system remains all but impossible, due to the nebulous nature of the concept, the limited time since many of the key policies were initiated and the fact that policy and practice on the ground continue to evolve at a rapid pace. Nevertheless, this section attempts to draw together the evidence so far and to highlight some of the areas for further exploration and consideration.

The success or failure of the government's approach will ultimately hinge on whether the quality of schools and the levels of children's and young people's achievement and attainment, particularly among the most disadvantaged groups, are seen to be improving. It is too early to make definitive judgements in these areas and the sheer number of changes to the national assessment and accountability system made by the Coalition will make it difficult to judge progress over time.

On school improvement, Ofsted's 2012-13 annual report (Ofsted, 2013a) painted a positive picture, with 78 per cent of all schools judged 'good' or 'outstanding', the highest proportion since Ofsted began. The proportion of primary schools judged 'good' or better rose again in 2013-14, to 82 per cent, although secondary schools had stalled compared to the previous year (71 per cent).

In contrast, the results from the 2012 round of PISA showed that England's results continue to flatline against international benchmarks (OECD, 2013).

As to equity, a wealth of analysis shows that the gap between FSM children and their peers has barely changed over the past two decades (Ofsted, 2013b). However, it is encouraging that children on FSM improved faster at Key Stage 2 than their non-FSM peers in 2014, perhaps indicating that the Pupil Premium and wider focus on progress is beginning to take effect.

Turning to the individual initiatives that have either informed the government's approach (such as London Challenge) or that form part of the current model (such as academy chains, Teaching Schools, and NLEs), much of the evidence on these has been summarised above. On academies, the DfE's 2014 annual report (DfE, 2014b) on academies shows that in 2012 and 2013:

- converter academies served less deprived students, performed higher overall but improved pupil outcomes at either the same rate as (primary) or less than (secondary) the national average; and

- sponsored academies served more deprived students, performed lower overall but improved pupil outcomes faster than the national average in both primary and secondary.

Other elements of the Coalition's approach (such as School Direct) are not being formally evaluated, however Ofsted's 2013-14 annual report (Ofsted, 2014) flagged significant concerns with the Coalition's approach to Initial Teacher Education, stating that:

> By 2023 there will be nearly 900,000 more pupils in schools in England. This rise in numbers is on a scale not seen since the 1960s. Worryingly, the number of new entrants to teacher training has fallen by 16 per cent since 2009/10 and was 7 per cent below target in 2014/15.

Speaking at the launch of the report, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools Sir Michael Wilshaw voiced concern that School Direct gives:

> "Good and outstanding schools… the opportunity to cherry-pick the best trainees (which) may further exacerbate the stark differences in local and regional performance. The nation must avoid a polarised education system where good schools get better at the expense of weaker schools" (The Guardian, 10.12.14).

What is hardest to get a sense of is how the self-improving system is actually developing in different areas and contexts or how schools across the piece are responding[1].

Peter Earley and Rob Higham's review of the school leadership landscape for the National College (Earley and Higham, 2012) assessed progress and leadership perspectives just as many of the key policies described above were in their early stages. The research indicated that the system was becoming more fragmented, although most leaders were confident about how they would manage change. The research identified four categories of headteachers – confident, cautious, concerned and constrained – based on a latent class analysis of responses to a national survey, as summarised in Table 2.

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1 A study now underway by Toby Greany and Rob Higham funded by CfBT and Nuffield aims to address this gap.

Table 2: Four categories or classes of headteachers based on their responses to a national survey

Classes	N	%	Thematic definition	Categorization
Class 1	183	22%	Positive about school autonomy and confident about actively pursuing new policy opportunities	Confident
Class 2	286	34%	Moderately positive about school autonomy, but cautious about engaging with policy	Cautious
Class 3	264	32%	Apprehensive about school autonomy and concerned about the potential impacts of policy	Concerned
Class 4	100	12%	Neutral on school autonomy, but sceptical about the aims and constraints of policy and negative about the potential impacts	Constrained

This characterisation of headteachers signals the different ways in which different leaders might interpret and respond to policy (Ball *et al*, 2012). The personal characteristics, beliefs and values of leaders will clearly be important here (Gu, Day and Armstrong, forthcoming), but it is also clear that leaders are shaped and driven by the institutional hierarchies that exist between schools. Thus, for example, while the headteacher of an Ofsted 'outstanding' school might reasonably consider whether to become an academy sponsor, a Teaching School or a stand-alone academy in the new system; his or her peer down the road in a school deemed to be 'Requiring Improvement' will have far fewer choices.

Coldron, Crawford, Jones and Simkins (2014) explored the responses of 15 well-positioned headteachers (ie heads of 'good' and 'outstanding' schools, most of whom were early academy converters) to the new landscape in their recent study. They conclude that the heads:

Tended to take a pragmatic view of how to respond to the changes, a logic of action that could be characterised as aiming to accumulate prestige… while recognising its precarious nature and maximising their own room for manoeuver, taking charge of their own destiny as far as possible… They built their social capital by forming a variety of alliances with other schools… (which) provided support and greater access to information as to what was happening nationally or locally… Being graded by Ofsted as at least Good and preferably Outstanding was what mattered most… Continuing to be so was strategically important because it meant popularity with parents was secure… personal values mattered (but)… where there was a conflict of personal professional values with the interest of the schools in light of national policy, the latter won… The headteachers we interviewed thought it was inevitable that the weak would get weaker and the strong stronger. They felt that increasingly competitive local fields are creating winners and losers.

Whilst the role and importance of school leaders, in particular Coldron et al's 'well positioned' headteachers, becomes ever more important in the school-led system, the role of local history and LAs continues to influence (though by no means determine) the shape of school collaboration and competition on the ground. In their research for the DfE, Sandals and Bryant (2014) tracked progress across ten LA areas from spring 2013 to spring 2014 with a focus on three areas of practice: school improvement, school place planning, and support for vulnerable children. These three areas has been identified as challenging through an earlier phase of DfE-sponsored action research by Local Authorities (Parish et al, 2012).
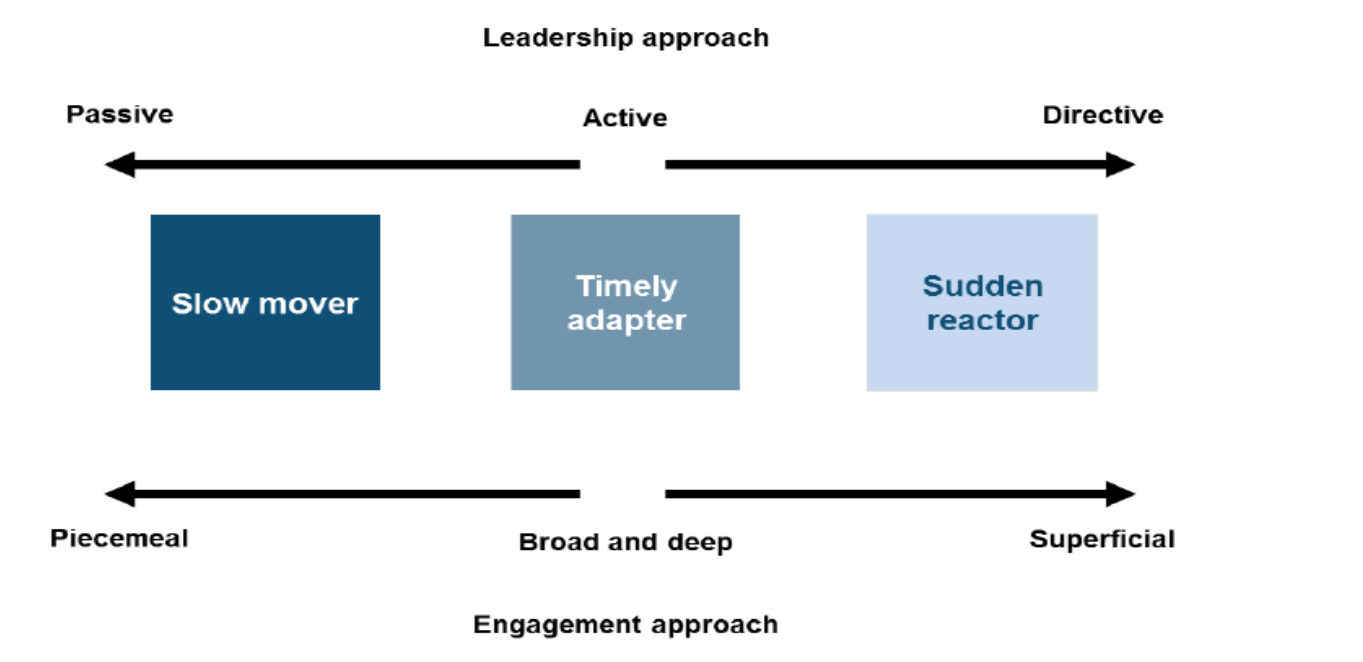
Whereas the 2012 report signalled concerns about lack of capacity for self-improvement and lack of buy-in from autonomous schools to areas where collective action and decision making will always be required (such as place-planning), the 2014 report paints a more positive picture. It found that confidence and commitment to partnership working was growing amongst school leaders and it cites many specific examples of how this is developing in different contexts. Confidence in the capacity of local systems to meet the needs of vulnerable children was less strong. The report also hints that some LAs are struggling to engage schools in a collaborative dialogue through its characterisation of them as either (see also Table 3):

● **Timely adapters** – mostly high-performing areas where LA services are highly regarded by schools, with a history of encouraging partnership-working and in which change to a schools-led system was already underway and/or has been led pro-actively, with LAs and schools working together to create the space and conditions for schools to lead the transition.

● **Slow movers** – mostly lower-performing systems with historically higher levels of intervention in schools, in which LA services are seen by schools as weak or variable in quality, and that have been slower in adapting to change or where the leadership of change has been ineffective.

- **Sudden reactors** – systems with different starting points, but the same end goal in mind: Namely, that LA services should diminish, regardless of quality, and that school partnerships should lead, regardless of their maturity. Change has been dictated and driven quickly, with pace outweighing precision in planning and engagement with school leaders, and without creating the conditions for schools to lead a successful transition.

Table 3: ISOS categorisation of local authority responses to the self-improving system (Sandals and Bryant, 2014)

Leadership approach

Passive　　　　　Active　　　　　Directive

| Slow mover | Timely adapter | Sudden reactor |

Piecemeal　　　Broad and deep　　　Superficial

Engagement approach

This more nuanced picture of variable change across different localities, with history and culture playing a strong role in shaping the ways that school leaders respond to the opportunities and challenges they face, chimes with the findings from other studies of local contexts (NfER, 2012; Smith and Abbott, 2014; Hatcher, 2014). While some LAs did appear to 'wash their hands' of education following the expansion of the academies policy and associated reduction in their capacity and apparent role, Ofsted's subsequent focus on area inspections and vigorous approach to holding LAs to account for the performance of all schools in their area appears to have forced a re-evaluation in most cases.

Conclusion

In summary, the self-improving school system is a concept that continues to evolve in both policy and practice. Despite differences between the Coalition and New Labour's approaches, there are also broad similarities in the extent to which they adopt the international trend towards high school autonomy and high accountability both to parents (via the quasi-market) and to the centre (via Ofsted). However, the Coalition's removal of support infrastructure for schools (in the form of LAs and national agencies), coupled with the sheer pace and scale of reform across most aspects of the system, make England an outlier in many respects. The OECD would appear to advocate a more consensual 'tri-level-reform' approach as seen in rapidly improving systems such as Ontario and East Asia.

Beyond the focus on autonomy, accountability and quasi-markets, the self-improving system does display innovative characteristics, most obviously in its focus on collaboration, system leadership and school-to-school support but also the growing efforts to make it school-led (for example through the new HTBs).

The view of the 'well-positioned heads' in Coldon et al's study that the strong will get stronger and the weak will get weaker in the self-improving system, arguably presents the greatest challenge to the model: what Greany (2014) has called the risk of a two-tier system. Linked to this is the finding by ISOS for the DfE (Sandals and Bryant, 2014d) that local areas remain unconvinced that they have the infrastructure required to meet the needs of the most vulnerable children.

International evidence is clear that successful school systems are equitable systems, with less stratification between schools (OECD, 2013), yet the work of Stephen Gorard (2013) and others has shown that schools in England have become more socially segregated as a result of choice policies over time. According to Gorard, 'the single largest educational determinant of segregation is the diversity of local schooling'. At this stage there is limited evidence that the Coalition's key policy aimed at closing the gap between FSM pupils and their peers – the Pupil Premium – is making these pupils more appealing to successful schools than their non-FSM peers. Other policies, such as School Direct, appear designed to embed hierarchies of schools by giving successful schools (which are more likely to be serving less deprived communities) inbuilt advantages over their less fortunate peers in terms of opportunities to recruit, train and then retain high quality teachers.

Where provision is focussed on meeting the needs of disadvantaged pupils is through sponsored academy chains, with some evidence of success overall (Hutchings, Francis and De Vries, 2014), but with significant differences between chains. Much may depend on whether growing proportions of successful schools can be incentivised to become sponsors and the model can be shown to work at scale.

It seems imperative that the ASCL blueprint finds ways to address the inherent risks of a two-tier system in its work. Beyond this, a number of related themes may warrant further consideration:

How to enhance evidence-informed improvement and high-quality professional development?

It is arguable that the self-improving system has unleashed a flood of innovation within individual schools and localities, yet the loss of national and local infrastructure for collating and sharing 'what works' coupled with the reduced national investment in research and evaluation means that the flow of rigorous evidence between schools and localities remains haphazard. The need for a self-improving system to be evidence-based is increasingly well recognised (Goldacre, 2013; NfER, 2014), but the research and development role of Teaching Schools is generally seen as the weakest strand (Gu et al, 2014). The work of the Education Endowment Foundation is important in this respect, but by its own admission, the foundation does not yet have sufficient understanding of how to mobilise knowledge to influence deeply practice across 21,000 schools (NfER, 2014). Universities could play a role here, but they have been consciously excluded from the self-improving system (Gove, 2012) and face significant capacity issues of their own as they address the impact of tuition fees. Meanwhile, the number of serving teachers and leaders undertaking masters degrees is falling rapidly (HEFCE, 2014). Recent research (Greany, Gu, Handscomb and Varley, 2014) indicates that school-university partnerships remain haphazard at best, while the focus on negotiating the division of income for work on School Direct has often skewed the potential for wider partnership discussions.

How to increase school capacity and manage workload?

The fact that increasing school autonomy leads to increased workload for the leaders and staff within those schools is reasonably well understood (Gronn, 2003), but the impact of the current high autonomy and high accountability model may still create significant and unmanageable pressures for schools, particularly if education and school funding reduces after the election. TALIS 2013 showed that teachers in England already work nine hours more per week than their international peers. The impact of sharp accountability coupled with limited institutional support plays into this, with reports of school leadership stress and burnout increasing (Edge, forthcoming) at the same time as high levels of headteachers leaving the profession due to poor Ofsted judgements.

How to align incentives for school and system leaders?

Part of the solution for managing the workload and capacity highlighted issues above may lie in finding ways to resolve some of the inherent tensions that currently face school leaders as they work to develop local responses to the self-improving system. For example, Gilbert (2012) and Greany (2014) have argued that Ofsted should move from always focussing on school-level accountability towards a model that holds partnerships of schools to account for the quality of support and challenge they provide to each other. This might help mitigate some of the current competitive pressures in the system that can detract from school-led models. However, there are other tensions in the system that will need to be addressed. Greany (2014) exemplifies these tensions in relation to Teaching Schools, but it is arguable that they play out at all levels:

● How to marry individual school accountability with system leadership roles and responsibilities?

● Are Teaching Schools a publicly funded good, or a solution for a broken school improvement marketplace?

● How to align national policy priorities – for example to expand School Direct - with the desire for a school-led system self-improving system?

● How to make local systems work for all children without losing leadership agency and dynamism?

This remains perhaps the hardest nut to crack and will underpin many of the education debates in the forthcoming election. At its heart is the question of how to ensure that every child can attend a school that is at least good, but through an organisational structure, that does not re-impose unnecessary bureaucracy. Instead, the aim must be to incentivise leaders to shape their own local solutions without compromising on equity.

Yet Ofsted (2014) has signalled significant concern that levels of capacity and engagement in system leadership and school-to-school differ by sub-region: so the self-improving seems to be developing in a patchy and haphazard way at best.

Part of the issue here relates to the role of LAs in local contexts and the vexed middle tier debate (Sandals and Bryant, 2014). Nearly 4,000 schools have become academies, but that leaves the vast majority of schools – more than four-in-five - in some form of maintained status. Even where all secondaries and most primaries have converted, Ofsted is putting pressure on LAs to fulfil their statutory functions. A number of commentators have explored questions such as how local democratic accountability might best be secured and how support and challenge for all schools might be orchestrated in the new system. Arguments range from increasing accountability through the market (O'Shaugnessy, 2010), to a re-conceptualised role for LAs (Academies Commission, 2013), to the need for a new middle tier to manage school provision, challenge and support (Hill, 2012 and Blunkett, 2014). To some extent, the Coalition appears to be tending towards the third of these models, with the creation of Regional Schools Commissioners and elected Headteacher Boards to oversee academies in each region, whilst at the same time pressuring LAs to fulfil their statutory functions. However, the success of such a twin-track model seems questionable at a time when resources are tight.

The ASCL blueprint has the potential to provide a future focussed and compelling vision for a self-improving system. In order to do so, it must address some of the issues and tensions highlighted here. Policy could do far more to incentivise and support deep partnerships between schools, but in doing so, it must ensure that the needs of all children are met and avoid the risk of a two-tier system.

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