

**Innovation is possible, it's just not easy: improvement, innovation and legitimacy in England's autonomous and accountable school system**

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# **Innovation is possible, it's just not easy: improvement, innovation and legitimacy in England's autonomous and accountable school system**

## **Abstract**

*This article reviews the literature and explores the institutional and systemic factors that help and/or hinder change and innovation across school systems, with a focus on evidence from England. A number of authors have argued that schools and school systems need to become more innovative and adaptive if they are to meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> Century societies and economies. Quasi-market models premised on school autonomy, parental choice and vertical accountability have been seen as the best way to secure innovation, but the evidence of success remains thin. The article analyses four examples of change and finds that system-wide change is possible, but requires strong and sustained political support and capacity building within a values-based framework that allows for local agency and adaptation. It concludes by drawing out three implications: the need to prioritise 'professional' as well as 'structural' autonomy; the potential for vertical accountability frameworks to condition the ways in which parents perceive and value innovation; and the need to enhance the legitimacy of innovation in the eyes of education's key stakeholders.*

**Keywords:** school system reform, innovation, change, accountability, legitimacy

## **Introduction**

A number of authors (Hallgarten et al, 2015; Caldwell and Spinks, 2013; Leadbeater and Wong, 2010; Hargreaves, 2003) have argued that schools and school systems need to become more innovative and adaptive if they are to meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> Century

societies and economies. Hallgarten et al (2015:22) state that despite decades of reform in education, real change has been constrained by an unquestioning acceptance of narrowly defined criteria for success, as measured through tests and exams:

*The structures that dictate the systems, processes and intended outcomes of the formal schooling system remain remarkably resilient. In the domain of organized tax-funded education, systems of schooling are for the most part in improvement mode: that is they take for granted the implicit parameters and metrics which maintain the industrial model of schooling.*

In their view this focus on 'improvement' has led to a crisis of legitimacy, resulting in issues such as learner dissatisfaction, disengagement and stress, growing costs, frustrated teachers, challenges with equity, and a mismatch with societies' real needs.

This raises a number of questions, including how policy and practice might best structure innovation efforts at scale and how change efforts can secure 'buy-in' from parents, teachers and other stakeholders, since these are essential for legitimacy (Gibton, 2016).

Over the past thirty years, quasi-market models premised on school autonomy, parental choice and competition between providers have been seen by policy makers around the world as the best way to secure flexible and innovative school systems (OECD, 2015b), but the evidence that such models are foster innovation remains thin (Lubienski, 2009). Recent work on innovation (Suggett, 2015; Hallgarten et al, 2015) suggests that traditional conceptualisations of top-down versus bottom-up change are largely inappropriate.

Similarly, the OECD argues that traditional notions of top down policy implementation are 'increasingly inadequate' because policy is 'notoriously impotent to change behaviour in teaching and learning' (2015a:17). Instead we need to understand change and innovation as orchestrated through complex combinations of vertical and lateral knowledge-mobilisation. This requires governance models that can both acknowledge and manage the risks involved in innovation, whether through evidence-based experimentation or through a willingness to acknowledge, and learn from, failure (Burns and Koster, 2016).

England's approach has reflected a quasi-market model, although within a tight vertical accountability framework and with a recent emphasis on building lateral networks of schools as one means to secure innovation and improvement (DfE, 2016; Greany, 2016). These lateral networks might offer the potential for 'middle out' change (Fullan, 2015), but the tightness of England's accountability framework and the stripping away of 'middle tier' and national infrastructure have narrowed the improvement focus of schools and reduced the capacity for strategic system-wide action (Cappon, 2015; Greany, 2015d). The OECD's 'composite innovation index' (2014) suggests that the English education system scores marginally higher than the OECD average, but this reflects higher levels of innovation in higher education than at primary or secondary levels.

This article starts by framing the approach it takes to analysing innovation, which is at system rather than school level. It then provides a brief review of current thinking on improvement and innovation across education systems and an outline of England's approach to school system reform in recent decades. It then introduces four short vignettes of real innovations that have been introduced in England and analyses these using an

adapted version of Leadbeater and Wong's conceptual framework (2010). It concludes by drawing out the implications of this analysis in the context of wider thinking on autonomy, accountability and legitimacy in quasi-market systems.

### **Framing the approach**

The focus of the article is primarily on the conditions required for successful innovation across school systems, rather than within single schools. This is not to suggest that intra-institutional change and innovation are not relevant, simply that they have already been studied extensively from both organisational and leadership perspectives (Kotter, 1996; Hall and Hord, 2001; Leithwood et al, 2006; Ofsted, 2009a and 2009b; Schein, 2010; Day et al, 2011; Matthews et al, 2014). A recent development in this area has been the study of evidence-informed practice, where the importance of trust and informal processes of influence have been highlighted as significant (Brown, 2015).

Research and thinking on system change and innovation has developed rapidly in recent years. Michael Fullan (2002) was arguably the first to observe the ways in which individual school leaders could and should consider their influence on other schools and the wider system as part of their moral purpose. David Hargreaves (2003) was among the first to recognise that systemic transformation would require a move away from top-down imposition and the development of disciplined innovation networks. These ideas are now being explored from a number of angles, including: policy development, implementation science, regulation and governance (Mourshed et al, 2010; Sahlberg, 2011; Greany, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Barber, 2015; Ehren et al, 2015; Ainscow, 2015; OECD, 2015; Burns and Köster, 2016); networks, partnerships, system leadership, school to school support and peer

evaluation (Hargreaves, 2012; Kamp, 2013; Suggett, 2015; Greany, 2015d; Matthews and Headon, 2015; Muijs, 2015); and knowledge mobilisation (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Daly, 2010; Greany, 2015c). At the same time, research on competition and quasi-markets in education has had a parallel interest in the extent to which these foster innovation (Glatter et al., 1997; Lubienski, 2009; Waslander et al, 2010), while other research has looked at specific aspects of innovation, such as in the curriculum (Kärkkäinen 2012).

### **Quasi-markets and innovation**

As Lubienski (2009) describes in detail, the economists such as Milton Friedman and Julian Le Grand who originally proposed quasi-markets in education saw choice and competition between schools as critical for driving enhanced innovation and quality. Similarly, the politicians championing autonomous charter schools in the US, academies in England and free schools in Sweden have all seen innovation and increased choice as primary outcomes. The implicit assumption seems to be that innovation by autonomous schools will be a naturally occurring feature of such systems as schools compete to attract and retain parents, with minimal need for additional interventions or support from policy.

In practice, studies (Glatter et al., 1997; Waslander et al, 2010) indicate that local hierarchies of schools develop in competitive systems, from the most to the least popular. 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. Clearly this presents a number of challenges, most importantly the potential for increased stratification by social class and

socio-economic status between schools (Gorard, 2013). A recent summary of research for the OECD (Waslander et al., 2010:7) concluded that 'the effects of market mechanisms in education are small, if they are found at all.'

Lubienski's review for the OECD (2009:18) explores these issues specifically in relation to innovation, distinguishing between different types of innovation, for example in processes as well as products. He finds that competition does make schools 'more sensitive and responsive to the demands of stakeholders... leading to a more diverse range of programmatic options in many localities'. But he also finds that 'we are seeing fewer new product and process innovations than might be expected, especially of the disruptive, "second-order" type' (ibid:27).

Thus it seems that autonomous schools operating in quasi-markets may increase choice for parents, by transposing existing innovations from elsewhere into the new context, but will not necessarily increase the overall level of innovation in a system.

### **High-autonomy-high-accountability systems and innovation**

England has arguably been one of the pioneers of quasi-market reform, introducing parental choice of school and funding-follows-the-learner mechanisms from 1988 onwards. But these reforms have formed part of a wider approach - characterised as high-autonomy-high-accountability - that is distinct from the market-based approach in its emphasis on central accountability.

Having lost faith in what Barber (2015) calls the post-war ‘trust and altruism’ model of public service delivery, in which local authorities ran schools with minimal central oversight, policy makers in England have devolved significant decision making power and resources to schools. School leaders in England were already among the most autonomous in the world at the start of the current decade (OECD, 2011) and levels of autonomy have been extended further in recent years through the academies programme (see below). Evidence suggests that it is school autonomy over curriculum and pedagogical choices – as opposed to financial and human resources – that correlates most closely with improvements in outcomes (OECD, 2011). Importantly, though, such approaches do not appear to be appropriate in all contexts: increased school autonomy appears to correlate with improvement only where levels of professional capacity are also high (Hanushek et al, 2012; Di Liberto et al, 2014; Bloom et al, 2014).

In order to incentivise improved outcomes in England’s autonomous schools, policy makers have put in place the market-based accountability systems described above alongside central regulation and control. This approach reflects the OECD’s advice to system reformers that autonomy must be combined with accountability if it is to drive consistent improvement across school systems (2015b). Key features of the central accountability system in England include: a National Curriculum, national tests and exams, the publication of school-level performance in these exams, floor targets and other metrics that schools are required to meet, regular inspections of schools with reports published grading schools on their quality, and a framework and system for intervening in schools that are deemed to be underperforming.



Well-designed accountability systems have the potential to mitigate some of the pitfalls of pure quasi-markets, not least by providing transparent information on school quality that can inform parental choice. Such systems can also provide clarity for schools on what success 'looks like' and can help government assess value for money (Ehren et al., 2014). The risk is that such systems quickly descend into an unhealthy 'performativity' regime (Ball, 2003), flattening the very freedom and autonomy that governments want to encourage while encouraging school leaders to narrow the curriculum (teaching to the test) and to focus their efforts on attracting the most desirable students (Waldegrave and Simons, 2014; Cappon, 2015).

A number of commentators argue that the solution is to build the capacity of the profession, for example through professional development programmes and models to support evidence-based decision-making, often linked to wider shifts such as lateral networks that can build trust and a more confident teacher profession (Sahlberg, 2011). The key challenge seems to be how to get the balance right between autonomy, accountability and professional capacity so that schools are focussed on both improvement and innovation in the interests of children.

### **England's 'self-improving school system' reforms since 2010**

The education reforms under the Conservative-led coalition government elected in 2010 and the Conservative majority government elected in 2015 have been radical and widespread, affecting almost every aspect of school life. They build on the previous two decades of quasi-market high-autonomy-high-accountability reforms but also take these to a different level, particularly in terms of school autonomy, whilst also introducing a much stronger focus on developing lateral networks as the basis for a 'self-improving school-led

system' (Greany, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015d). A key tenet of the approach is that 'the attempt to secure automatic compliance with central government initiatives reduces the capacity of the school system to improve itself' (DfE, 2010:13).

Greany (2014) suggests that there are four principles underpinning the government's approach to the self-improving system:

- I. Teachers and schools are responsible for their own improvement
- II. Teachers and schools learn from each other and from research so that effective practice spreads
- III. The best schools and leaders extend their reach across other schools so that all schools improve
- IV. Government support and intervention is minimised.

Changes since 2010 have included: a new National Curriculum and framework for national tests and exams; a more demanding accountability model for schools; significant changes to how teachers are recruited, trained, performance managed and rewarded; a move towards a national funding system and the introduction of additional funding for each child in receipt of Free School Meals (Lupton et al, 2015).

Structural change has been a major feature of the reforms, increasing school autonomy through the academies programme. Academies are companies and charities that are funded directly by central government, rather than their Local Authority (LA). Academies have greater autonomy than LA maintained schools: for example they can operate their own admissions within a broad framework and are not required to follow the National

Curriculum or employ qualified teachers. By early 2016 there were 5,500 academies in total, representing almost one in four schools (Morgan, 2016). Multi-Academy Trusts (MAT – federations or chains of schools operating under one governance board) have become a central feature of the system: around 58 per cent of all academies and free schools are now in a formal chain (HoC Education Select Committee, 2015). Another plank of the Coalition’s structural reform approach has been to support the development of new ‘free schools’, Studio Schools, University Technical Colleges and University Training Schools (discussed below). By September 2016 there will be 438 free schools open.

A further innovation has been the expansion of ‘system leadership’ and school to school support, through which successful leaders are encouraged to work across two or more schools (Greany, 2016). School to school support is arguably now the primary mechanism for school improvement in England (Earley et al., 2012; HoC Education Select Committee, 2013; Sandals and Bryant, 2014).

The corollary of these shifts has been a wholesale reshaping of England’s middle tier, with the democratically elected Local Authorities largely hollowed out but still nominally responsible for maintained schools (around three in four of the total) and the emergence of a mixed economy of academy chains and DfE-appointed Regional Schools Commissioners overseeing the 5,500 academies (Greany, 2015d). The Department for Education’s 2016 white paper (DfE, 2016) announced the intention to move all schools into academy structures, with all primary schools entering MATs, by 2022.

Assessing the impact of the self-improving system so far is challenging given the rapid pace and scale of change and the limited time for the reforms to bed in. On the one hand reports suggest that private fee paying schools are struggling to recruit students because the perception of state-funded schools has improved so dramatically among parents<sup>1</sup>, while on the other there is some evidence that a 'two-tier' system is developing in which strong state schools thrive but weaker ones are left struggling (Coldron et al, 2014; Earley et al, 2012) as well as significant concerns around teacher recruitment, workload and regional disparities in performance (Ofsted, 2015; DfE, 2015). As yet, there is little hard evidence that either academies on their own or working together in MATs make a significant difference to outcomes (Sims et al, 2015; Hutchings et al, 2015). The 2012 PISA results suggested that England's performance against international comparators has continued to flatline (OECD, 2013).

### **Examples of innovation: pedagogy, curriculum and school improvement**

This section presents examples of change and innovation in three areas: pedagogy, curriculum and school improvement. The examples are not intended to be archetypes of all change in the English system, but have been selected by the author to illustrate the issues relating to change and innovation that are discussed in the final section. The data drawn on differ for each example, with no standard methodology, since the cases span very different contexts, scales and time periods.

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<sup>1</sup> Headline in The Guardian '“Massively' improved state schools threaten private sector: Better behaviour and results are attracting families who can afford private school fees, says Good Schools Guide editor', 5.2.16  
<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/feb/05/massively-improved-state-schools-threaten-private-sector>  
accessed 24.2.16

### Pedagogy example: changes in pedagogy in primary schools

The first example has been selected to illustrate that large scale change at classroom level can happen, although the timescales involved are significant and it is hard to identify the specific drivers of such change. The evidence comes from Webster's (2015) analysis of six separate systematic observation studies conducted in English primary classrooms between 1976 and 2012. Table 1 shows the time that pupils observed in each of the studies spent interacting in class with either: a teacher or teaching assistant (whether as part of a whole class, part of a group or individually); with their peers, or with no one. The findings are separated between children with and without Special Educational Needs (SEN), although only three of the six studies observed these groups separately. Table 1 shows that for non-SEN children, interactions with the teacher increase from 16% of the time in 1976 to 40% in 2011-12. This increase is the result of an increase in whole class teaching (ie part of class) rather than individual or small group teaching. Peer interaction increases from 19% to 32% over the same period, while 'no interaction' decreases from 66% of the time to 26%.

Although not all the studies looked at children with SEN, those that do show marked increases in time spent with a teaching assistant, with much smaller increases in the amount of time spent interacting with their teachers than their non-SEN peers. The trends over time are relatively consistent, although the 2005 DISS study has some exceptions in this respect.

[insert Table 1 here]

Table 1: Evidence from six systematic observation studies undertaken in primary school classrooms over a 35 year period, from Webster, 2015

Webster is rightly cautious about speculating too much as to why the classroom experience of children observed in these studies changes over the period. He does note that for non-SEN children the authors of some of original observation studies linked these changes to the introduction of the National Curriculum from 1988 onwards. However, this assumption can be challenged since the results are relatively static between the One in Five study (1981-2) and the Oracle 2 study (1995-6), suggesting that the National Curriculum itself did not make a rapid difference. The big increase in whole class teaching seems to come between Oracle 2 (1995-6) and DISS (2005-6), a period that arguably saw the strongest ever state intervention in pedagogy through the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies. These were explicit in requiring all primary schools to allocate specific amounts of time to these subjects every day and ensuring that teachers adopted standardized whole class teaching methods (Alexander, 2011). Whole class teaching then dipped slightly between DISS (2005-06) and MAST (2011-12) perhaps reflecting the fact that the National Strategies became less prescriptive over time and were then closed down in 2010.

#### Curriculum example 1: innovation in free schools and academies

Free Schools have been explicitly set up since 2010 to challenge existing providers and to provide innovative curricula and pedagogical models (DfE, 2010). Like all academies free schools are not required to follow the National Curriculum or to employ qualified teachers. The government's original vision was that parents and voluntary groups might set up the schools, reflecting their own priorities and needs, but in practice the challenges involved in establishing a new school have meant that nearly half are now actually set up by established academy chains (Ofsted, 2015).

There are examples of free schools that have sought to offer a distinctive curriculum, reflecting both traditionalist and 21<sup>st</sup> Century ends of spectrum. For example, the West London Free School offers a 'a classical – knowledge-based - curriculum, including compulsory Latin up to the age of 14',<sup>2</sup> perhaps as a way to attract parents that might otherwise prefer a private education and reflecting Lubienski's comment about the traditional nature of parental expectations. By contrast, School21<sup>3</sup> has set out to offer 'new ways of teaching for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' aimed at developing a set of six attributes: eloquence, grit, professionalism, spark, craftsmanship and expertise. Both schools have proved popular with parents and have been judged positively by Ofsted, the school's inspectorate. By contrast, a small number of the other early free schools have been less successful, with two high profile examples where the school was closed after being judged Inadequate by Ofsted.

As yet there is relatively little research on free schools, but one study of the first two cohorts that opened after 2010 indicated that curriculum innovation had been limited, with a mixture of government bureaucracy and accountability requirements as the main cause (Dunford et al, 2012). Some have argued that the need to conform to the existing national accountability requirements has meant that free schools have been constrained in their ability to innovate (Taylor, 2012).

Turning to the much larger group of over 5000 schools that have either converted or been forced to become academies since 2010, they are also not required to follow the National Curriculum. As with charter schools in the US, the expectation was that the academies would use their additional freedoms to innovate their curriculum (Greany and Waterhouse,

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://wlfs.org/> accessed 10.3.16

<sup>3</sup> See <http://school21.org.uk/> accessed 10.3.16

2016). Thus far, however, the evidence indicates that this ambition has not been realised, or at least only in part. For example, a survey of academy leaders in 2014 (Finch et al, 2014) found that only 35% had, or planned to develop, a curriculum that varied from the National Curriculum. The authors concluded that 'academies are not fully capitalising on the freedoms they have over the curriculum' (ibid:18).

### Curriculum example 2: developing the capacity to teach Chinese

The teaching of Mandarin Chinese has emerged as a policy priority in the UK in recent years. Addressing the challenge from a standing start is arguably beyond the resources of a single school or even school chain to address because it requires action on multiple fronts, such as recruiting and training Chinese-speaking teachers to work in English schools, creating appropriate curriculum resources and formal exams, finding space in an already crowded curriculum and persuading parents and teachers that it is a suitable subject for academic study.

Tinsley and Board (2014) researched the development of Chinese teaching in schools across the UK. They identified just ninety-five primary schools in England that are teaching Chinese – which equates to around 1 in 160 – while in Scotland they identified 119 such primary schools - equating to around 1 in 16. The researchers are clear that Scotland's strategic plan for addressing issues such as teacher training and its support for implementation in schools through Local Authority hubs is part of that country's apparent success. By contrast, England's 'self-improving' system has very few capacity building levers to pull. For example, teachers are increasingly trained by schools rather than universities in England and the lack of scale and capacity in these school-based operations makes it challenging for them to take



on new, high-risk curriculum subjects such as Chinese. Similarly, the Local Authorities have all but disappeared from England and while the new academy chains and school networks are beginning to provide an alternative 'middle tier' infrastructure, their coverage is far from comprehensive across all schools and the quality of their work is variable (Gu et al, 2015).

### School improvement example: school to school support

Until the early 2000s, England's school system was characterised as highly competitive (Higham et al, 2009) and if a school was deemed to be failing then the response was invariably to send in teams of consultants to help turn it round. Just over 10 years later it is arguable that school to school support has become the predominant model for school improvement (HoC Education Select Committee, 2013). This shift from competition between schools to structured collaboration and support arguably represents a significant innovation in a system of 24,000 schools.

School to school support was pioneered through the London Challenge programme, which ran from 2004 to the end of the decade (Baars et al, 2014). Faced by the need to address systemic underperformance in the capital's schools, the London Schools Commissioner, Sir Tim Brighouse, persuaded some of the capital's most successful headteachers to support the 'keys to success' schools that had been identified as needing most improvement. The rationale for this approach was that support from credible, serving leaders and teachers would be more effective than that from external consultants (Matthews and Hill, 2010). The 'consultant head' model was scaled up nationally by the then National College for School Leadership through the National Leaders of Education/National Support Schools (NLE) and Local Leaders of Education (LLE) initiative. These headteachers and their teams are

designated against a clear set of criteria and then brokered to support schools deemed to be under-performing. Evidence to date does indicate that outcomes improve faster in NLE-supported schools than in a matched sample (NCTL, 2013; Muijs, 2015) and that NLEs increase the rate of improvement for children on free school meals (FSM) (Rea et al, 2013).

Meanwhile, more structured forms of partnership through federations and Multi-Academy Trusts were also adopting school to school support. Whereas the NLE/NSS model involves temporary support from one school to another, as described above, federations and MATs both involve the school being subsumed into a larger group that is overseen by a single governing body or board, with schools within the group commonly supporting each other to improve. Chapman et al's (2011) research for the National College indicated a positive federation effect on pupil outcomes over time, most significantly in the case of 'performance federations' (i.e. strong and weak schools together) and where an Executive Head was in place. However, analysis by Hutchings et al (2015) suggests that whilst academy chains (MATs) do appear to be improving outcomes for the most disadvantaged schools, performance between chains is highly variable.

Teaching School Alliances represent another model for school to school support, both because the partnership remains voluntary for alliance members and because the alliance remit is broader than just addressing underperformance. Launched in the 2010 White Paper (DfE, 2010) Teaching Schools are Ofsted Outstanding schools that are designated by the government to play a leading role in co-ordinating initial and continuing professional development, school to school support and research and development across an alliance of partner schools. By October 2015 692 Teaching Schools had been designated, while by

October 2014 at least 7,144 schools were linked with a Teaching School, representing 32% of all maintained schools in England. The evaluation (Gu et al, 2016) reflects considerable progress overall and indicates the sheer diversity of organizational forms and approaches emerging, but also highlights the challenges for these informal partnerships where resources are scarce and schools are constantly pre-occupied by their own performance due to the high stakes nature of the accountability framework.

### **Categorising and analysing the examples**

Clarifying the nature and impact of improvement and innovation in education, and the conditions required to support them, requires a clear set of definitions. Leadbeater and Wong (2010) utilise a simple four-box framework for categorising the innovations that they study. The dimensions are: formal versus informal learning and sustaining versus disruptive innovation. Formal learning here indicates school or institution-based, while informal implies online as well as family and community-based. Sustaining innovation here implies an incremental enhancement in existing learning products, systems or processes, and so is close to Hallgarten et al's 'improvement'; while a disruptive innovation implies a more transformational approach involving paradigmatic changes in the way we provide or experience learning. This gives four possible combinations:

- sustaining innovation in formal learning - Improve
- sustaining innovation in informal learning – Supplement
- disruptive innovation in formal learning – Reinvent
- disruptive innovation in informal learning – Transform.

These distinctions can be enhanced by adding an assessment of length, depth and breadth. Length here indicates the duration of the change, depth indicates how embedded it is, and breadth indicates how widespread it is.<sup>4</sup>

This still leaves open the question of where change and innovation stem from and how they can be influenced. Notwithstanding the points made above about the limitations of such conceptualisations, it is helpful here to differentiate between top-down and bottom-up change. Top-down change is imposed on schools or teachers, for example through policy, legal or accountability structures: 'doing things differently because we have to'<sup>5</sup>. Bottom up change occurs where schools and teachers respond to the changing needs of learners and communities, to new findings from research, or simply out of a belief that they can find new ways to address problems of practice: 'doing things differently because we think it will make them better'. In practice these distinctions can blur, as the categorisations below illustrate.

The four examples described in the previous section are very different and have different evidence bases, although they all represent attempts to secure systemic change across multiple schools. The purpose in selecting such a wide range of examples is to explore system change from different angles and across different areas of practice in order to highlight issues and perspectives that might not be apparent from a single case.

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<sup>4</sup> These headings are drawn from current work by Professor Louise Stoll with the author.

<sup>5</sup> In practice schools and teachers sometimes think that certain activity is required, even when it isn't. For example, Ofsted, England's inspection agency recently published a list of 'inspection myths': <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/oct/17/ofsted-tells-teachers-what-not-to-do-in-effort-to-dispel-inspection-myths>

The examples are categorised in Table 2 using an adapted version of Leadbeater and Wong's framework (Formal, Informal, Sustaining, Disruptive) which also shows the Length, Depth, Breadth, Top down and Bottom up categories defined above.

The first two columns are all marked 'Yes' for Formal Learning and 'No' for Informal Learning except Teaching Chinese, where some schools are offering Chinese as a voluntary activity in after school clubs. All four examples are marked 'Yes' for Sustaining Innovation, since all are aimed at improving children's learning within the terms of England's existing assessment and accountability framework. However, some can also be classed as Disruptive, either because they represent a change to an existing paradigm (for example School 21 in relation to curriculum/outcomes) or a fundamental change to existing processes in the case of school to school support via NLEs, MATs and TSAs.

The Top Down heading is categorised in three areas: framework, facilitation and funding. 'Framework' represents the extent to which the approach is more or less structured. Thus the Primary pedagogy example is categorised as Tight, because the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies were explicit in prescribing whole class teaching approaches and schools were monitored to ensure compliance. The school to school support example is categorised as 'Medium', because there are clear national criteria and processes for the designation and de-designation of NLEs and Teaching Schools, but this prescription does not extend to where and how the schools then work. Free schools and academies are categorised as 'Medium', because Dunford et al (2012) note that the originally loose policy framework for free schools was tightened up over time, while Greany and Scott (2014) note the same for the wider group of academies. The Teaching Chinese framework is Loose because the

approach allows for considerable flexibility. Turning to 'facilitation', this represents the degree to which the initiative was promulgated and supported, for example through dedicated field forces, while 'funding' represents the extent to which funding was used to incentivise school engagement (as opposed to the level of investment in the initiative as a whole). The categorisations here are reasonably self-evident: for example school to school support has been established through NCSL's role in brokering NLEs to work with underperforming schools (Medium facilitation), but has largely relied on funding to incentivise activity (Significant funding). By contrast, the DfE has tried to minimise its involvement in establishing free schools and academy converters (Passive facilitation), but has used funding incentives to encourage participation (Finch et al, 2014).

The Bottom Up heading has been categorised in two ways. Firstly, according to whether the approach was 'initiated' by the schools themselves, whether they were 'engaged' via the process, or whether they were required to 'adopt' it. Secondly, whether the schools could 'adapt' the approach to fit their context and purposes or whether they were required to 'apply' it in standardised ways. As can be seen, the volunteer schools involved in the Teaching Chinese and free schools and academies examples all initiated their involvement and were given the freedom to adapt the approach to meet their needs. By contrast, the primary pedagogy schools were largely required to 'adopt' and 'apply' the Literacy and Numeracy strategies. For school to school support there is a clear difference between those that volunteered to be designated as NLEs, Teaching Schools or academy sponsors (initiate/adapt) and those that are required to accept such support due to weak performance (adopt/apply).

To a large extent the Length, Depth and Breadth categories can be seen as an assessment of the impact of the four innovations. The picture here is more varied and the categorisations may be open to greater challenge. The primary pedagogy changes appear to have reached across the system (Breadth – Wide) and been sustained between the DISS (2005-06) and MAST (2010-11) studies (Length – Long), although the drop in whole class teaching by the time of the MAST study may indicate that the approach had not become fully embedded (Depth – Medium). The School21-type examples of significant innovation in free schools and academies appear to be exceptions rather than the rule, so there is a question mark over whether we should categorise these exceptions or the wider group. The Length box is marked ‘Medium’, on the basis that the initiative has only been operating since 2010 (a small number of academies were established prior to that but were conceptualised and funded very differently). Depth is marked ‘Medium’ on the basis that the changes in the more innovative examples are still being established. The Breadth box is marked ‘Thin’ on the basis that the innovative examples remain isolated. Teaching Chinese is categorised as Length – Medium, Depth – Shallow and Breadth – Thin, on the basis that the initiative remains recent, most schools involved see Chinese as an add-on to their core curriculum and proportionately few schools have engaged. School to school support is categorised as Length – Long, Depth – Deep and Breadth – Wide, on the basis that the changes now extend over more than a decade, most schools and alliances will have a range of staff involved for at least some of their time and the approach has now largely replaced other forms of improvement support.

**[Insert table 2 about here]**

Assessing these categorisations as a whole raises some interesting questions. Some patterns are unsurprising, for example that none of the examples seriously engage with Informal Learning. Others might be seen as more intriguing: for example, how might we understand the differences between the free schools and academies programme and the school to school support approach? Both involve a level of disruptive innovation and both operate within a similar Top Down/Bottom Up framework, although the facilitation of school to school support is slightly more active. Yet, while the impact of school to school support is Long, Deep and Wide, the impact of free schools and academies is, as yet, Medium, Medium and Thin.

### **Discussion: conceptualising system-wide innovation issues**

The categorisations and analysis in the previous section are not meant to be scientific. The examples are too disparate and the evidence base underpinning them too variable to be able to make a robust assessment of 'what works' in innovation. Nevertheless, the examples do seem to illustrate three important high level points.

Firstly, asking teachers to change their practice in significant ways is risky and demanding. This is not to imply that disruptive innovation in education is not possible: the School 21 example illustrates this and there are other examples in the literature (Leadbeater and



Wong, 2010; OECD, 2015). Nevertheless, the challenges and risks involved in innovation need to be carefully addressed by policy makers as well as practitioners and it may not always be possible to mitigate these. To recast the words of Thomas Edison, highly innovative schools and school systems will inevitably encounter high levels of failure.

Secondly, the core premise underpinning quasi-market thinking – ie that increasing school autonomy and inter-school competition will automatically lead to systemic innovation – appears to be flawed. The free schools and academies reflect a classic quasi-market reform, in that they have greater autonomy than maintained schools and are actively encouraged to innovate. Yet, in practice, the overall assessment of the independent Academies Commission (2013) was that academies have not used their increased freedoms to innovate. School 21 (and, to a lesser extent, the West London Free School) does provide an example of innovation, but this appears to be an outlier that is dependent on visionary leadership agency (the Head teacher was a former policy adviser to Tony Blair). At best, the wider group of academies and free schools might come to reflect Lubienski's (2009) finding that US charter schools are effective at translating existing innovations to new contexts and at process innovations around marketing and governance.

Thirdly, system-wide change and innovation is possible, but requires strong and sustained political support and capacity building within a values-based framework that allows for local agency and adaptation. The primary pedagogy and school to school support examples both illustrate the ability of England's school system to change. The primary pedagogy example appears to have been the result of a strong top-down implementation effort with relatively little scope for local adaptation and agency. This was successful in securing change across

multiple schools, but the drop in whole class pedagogy by the time of MAST (2010-11) may indicate that these changes were not sufficiently embedded to become sustainable, perhaps because of the limited Bottom Up engagement and adaptation involved. School to school support also required strong political leadership and some financial investment, but it differed from the primary pedagogy example in several respects. Firstly, it emerged as a tried and tested model from the London Challenge where it was pioneered by some of the leading schools, so it had a basis in practice and a set of credible champions (Ainscow, 2015). Secondly, it was based on a clear set of values: successful schools saw it as part of their moral purpose to support other schools, so while the funding incentives were important it seems unlikely that they would have been sufficient on their own. Thirdly, it was taken to scale by a national agency (NCSL) that operated a transparent designation framework but left significant scope for local agency and adaptation within the approach (Matthews and Hill, 2010).

The Teaching Chinese case offers a link between these second and third points. England's quasi-market approach has relied on local leadership agency with minimal central investment and a weak implementation architecture. The result is a weak level of innovation. By contrast, at this stage, Scotland's more statist model appears to have been more effective, at least in securing engagement from a wider group of schools.

These three findings appear significant, not least since the third one seems to contradict the OECD's (2015a) view that top-down policy is 'impotent' to effect change, while the second one provides an important counter-point to those who argue for ever greater school autonomy with minimal central co-ordination. Rather, the challenge is to balance central

structure and local agency, so that innovation is encouraged and learning is spread (Wermke and Hostfalt, 2014). Neither can succeed without the other because, as Kärkkäinen (2012: 49) argues in relation to curriculum innovation, ‘neither pure centralisation nor pure decentralisation is an ideal universal solution’. What is clear is that this central-middle-local approach requires a sophisticated set of capabilities from those overseeing public education systems. These capabilities stretch traditional conceptions of public sector governance, as Suggett (2015:17) implies:

*School autonomy works in tandem with system capability – and it is not older style bureaucracy that is needed, but new systems that can articulate and respond to evidence-based improvement practices, and understand change management.*

Building such capability requires both effective governance and systems for vertical knowledge sharing so that policy and practice inform each other. Fazekas and Burns (2012: 23 cited in OECD 2015a:75) argue that knowledge management is the key to success in these contexts in order to enable systemic learning:

*Knowledge is crucial for governance and governance is indispensable for knowledge creation and dissemination. As complexity in education systems continues to increase, governance systems’ capacity to learn becomes more and more crucial.*

What has been less recognised in these discussions is the need for these governance models to continuously engage teachers, parents and other stakeholder groups so that they understand and subscribe to the aims of systemic innovations. Without the legitimacy that

such support brings the innovations might not only fail in themselves, they might precipitate wider challenges to quasi-market education systems. New institutional theory defines legitimacy here as the acceptance of an organization by its external environment (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, quoted in Gibton, 2016). Governments have traditionally provided the legitimacy required for public education systems through their democratic mandate, but the development of autonomous schools overseen by 'closed managerialist networks' (Hatcher, 2014) and corporate-style chains, federations, and commissioners (Gibton, 2016) risks breaking that link, with few opportunities for electors, parents or other community groups to influence the direction of travel. Waslander (2010) provides an instructive example from the Netherlands in this respect, where pedagogic innovations initiated by independent school boards led to a sustained media and public backlash, driven by a concern that the traditional role of 'knowledge' was being disregarded. As a result the government has passed new legislation which limits the autonomy of publicly funded schools – a status that had been enshrined in the constitution a century before. Waslander concludes that this was a result of the school boards losing their legitimacy, among teachers as well as parents, through a lack of good governance and stakeholder engagement; a view endorsed by the Dutch chief inspector of schools (Dutch Ministry of Education, Media and Culture, 2014:41-42).

This leads to three final conclusions:

The first is that we need a more nuanced definition of autonomy which distinguishes between 'structural' and 'professional' autonomy. Structural autonomy here denotes the extent to which the legal and policy framework formally delegates decision-making powers

to school boards and/or leaders in two areas: resources (e.g. budgets/staffing) and curriculum/pedagogy. By contrast, 'professional autonomy' reflects a view that autonomy is as much about the confidence, capacity and effectiveness of school leaders and teachers and the trust placed in them by district and national officials as it is about formal delegated powers (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). Strengthening 'professional autonomy' needs to become a higher priority than extending structural autonomy further. This could happen through the strengthening of existing lateral networks and the establishment of governance structures and agencies that can support knowledge mobilisation.

The second is that the vertical accountability framework not only prescribes the parameters for innovation in many systems, it may also condition how parents perceive and value innovation. Vertical accountability to government appears to have both a coercive and normative power over school leaders, in that it requires them to act in certain ways (backed by rewards and sanctions) and also ingrains a sense that this is the 'only way to do things'. But that same vertical accountability may also have a normative impact on parents, telling them that only the qualifications that government deems important are worthy of consideration and that only the schools that the inspectorate deems high quality are worth of choosing for their children. Thus vertical accountability may actually condition market accountability to parents so that they require one and the same thing from schools – high test scores and good inspection judgements. Innovation appears to be a casualty of this process.

The third is the need to enhance the legitimacy of innovation in the eyes of education's key stakeholders: in particular teachers, parents and employers. Proponents of quasi-markets

may see choice as conferring legitimacy on innovation: parents can choose between Latin at West London Free School, 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills at School 21, or the standard GCSE offer at most other English schools. If they are not happy they can go elsewhere. But if it is the case that these remain isolated examples and that quasi-markets are not successful at fostering significant innovation (Lubienski, 2009), then the question is not only how might change and innovation be developed systematically, but also how can any such change avoid the public backlash described by Waslander in the Netherlands (2010). Any such effort must originate with governments, since legitimacy must stem from their democratic mandate even if, in practice, they are not always best placed to champion change. This point is clearly linked to the two above: in developing the 'professional autonomy' of school leaders, it will be important to equip them with the skills needed and a fit for purpose governance framework that can secure stakeholder engagement. Equally, if the accountability framework conditions parental expectations of schools, then it stands to reason that innovations must be given some level of legitimacy by that same framework if parents are to perceive them positively.

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