

Closing the attainment gap

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Closing the attainment gap – a realistic proposition or an elusive pipe dream? – examining the role of leadership



This paper argues that:

- Educational leadership is not an end in itself – it serves a purpose and at the centre of this lie learning and social justice
- Fundamental to improving outcomes for all children is high quality school leadership
- The challenges facing education systems across the world are of such magnitude that a systems-level approach is required
- Central to this endeavour is ethical and moral leadership

The focus of this paper

- Addressing the achievement gap between children from impoverished backgrounds and those in more advantageous circumstances
- Understanding the nature of the problem
- Examining and critiquing the policy context in Scotland as it pertains to the above
- Examining the concepts of systems and distributive leadership
- Focussing upon leadership and moral purpose

The Problem

International context

- The country in which children attend school outweighs social class in impacting upon pupil achievement
- Social class is closely associated with student and school characteristics and exerts 'a powerful influence on learning outcomes'

Schleicher, 2014: 19

International Context



A False Dichotomy

‘Excellence without equity risks leading to large economic and social disparities; equity at the expense of quality is a meaningless aspiration.’

Schleicher, 2014: 14

International Context

- *'Across OECD countries, almost one in five students does not reach a basic minimum level of skills to function in society, and roughly the same proportion of students drops out of school before completing their secondary education. Disadvantaged students are twice as likely as their advantaged peers to be poor performers, implying that personal or social circumstances are obstacles to achieving their potential.'* (Schleicher, 2014, 12)

UK and Scottish context

- Conflict between policies directed towards alleviating poverty and a neo-liberal agenda and market economy – ‘survival of the fittest’
- Wide range of government policies over the past few decades but the problem has been highly resistant to change

Scottish Context

- Findings of OECD report replicated in Scotland – of the 20% low performers substantially more live in deprived areas
- ‘Who you are in Scotland is far more important than what school you attend, so far as achievement differences on international tests are concerned. *Socio-economic status is the most important difference between individuals*’ (15). (OECD, 2007)

Towards an equitable school system

- Comprehensive education introduced in 1965 to address inequalities – children to attend their local school
- Principles not fully realised because of conurbations of socially segregated housing and parental choice policy
- Has promoted equality of opportunity, parity of esteem but not equality of outcome (Murphy et al., 2016)

Social mobility as a means of rising above poverty

- Despite a range of UK and Scottish government policies, social mobility has remained largely static
- Whilst more young people from poor backgrounds enter the university system they attend less prestigious universities
- Internationally, social mobility has largely been impervious to change (Halsey, 2013)

Social mobility as a means of rising above poverty

There is no longer 'room at the top', 'leading to social congestion as middle-class families compete amongst themselves and with working-class families for 'the spoils' ... *what some achieve, all cannot: while everyone can do their best, not everyone can be the best.*

(Brown, 2013, 682)



The challenge

- The assumption is made that child poverty is only associated with unemployment but in 2012 over 50% of children in poverty in Scotland came from homes where one parent worked (Scottish Government, 2014)
- Likewise, it is assumed that the majority of children living in poverty come from deprived areas, but poverty is interspersed across communities
- Whilst in the period between 2008 – 2012 both absolute and relative poverty decreased in Scotland, the trend has changed (Sosu & Ellis, 2014)

Recent insights

- Review of the 'Child Poverty Strategy' (2014) (Scotland) indicated that the gap in attainment between rich and poor is established at an early age before children enter the formal schooling system and widens as they get older
- While local authorities and schools have invested effort, there is a lack of an empirical evidence base for the approaches adopted – there is a need to gather more robust data and establish 'what works' (Sosu and Ellis, 2014)

The Scottish Government's Response

The Scottish Government's Response

The Government is committed to doing all in its power to eradicate poverty in Scotland – but it will never be acceptable for poverty to be an excuse for failure. It is our job – the job of everyone in this room – to overcome that barrier, not use it as an excuse. And, we will not have completed our work until every child, in every community, has every chance to succeed.

Angela Constance, address to
Robert Owen Centre 19/05/15

Scottish Government's Response

- The National Attainment Challenge
(based upon the model of the London Challenge)
- National Improvement Framework (2016)

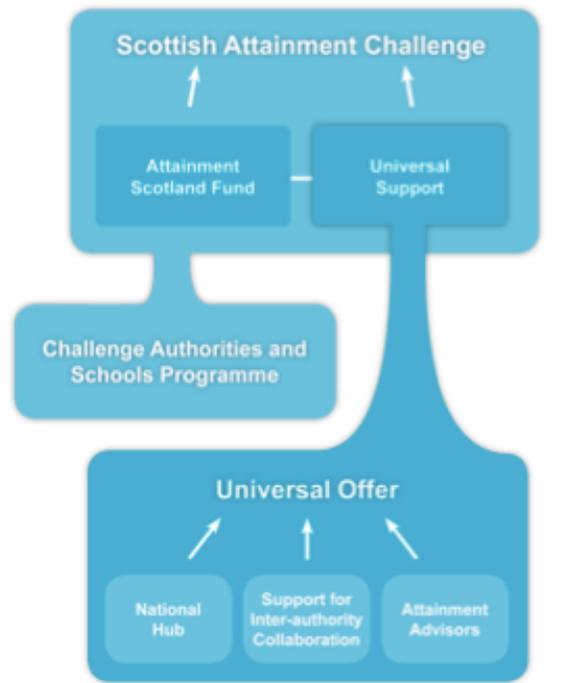
London Challenge

- Focuses on the quality of leadership and teaching and learning, supported by professional learning
- Detailed use of data to support progress
- Team of advisors to provide tailored support to schools
- Positive focus upon improvement

London Challenge

- Highly acknowledged as having had a significant impact upon achievement in London's schools to the extent that it is regarded as one of the highest performing cities in England
- However, findings contested – Burgess (2014) argues that the 'London effect' can be entirely accounted for by the changing ethnic composition of its schools and Greaves et al. (2014) argue that it is improvements in Primary schools (preceding the 'Challenge') which led to the improvements evidenced

Scottish Attainment Challenge



- Attainment Fund to support 'Challenge Authorities and Schools Programme'
- National Hub
- Inter-authority collaboration
- Attainment Advisors

Tensions: Challenging what works

- For whom? (for *all* children?)
- In which set of circumstances?
- In which respects?
- By which measures is success measured?
- Are these the right measures?
- How robust are they?
- Who decides?
- Whose voices are heard?

If we only focus on 'what works', where is there room for creativity and innovation?

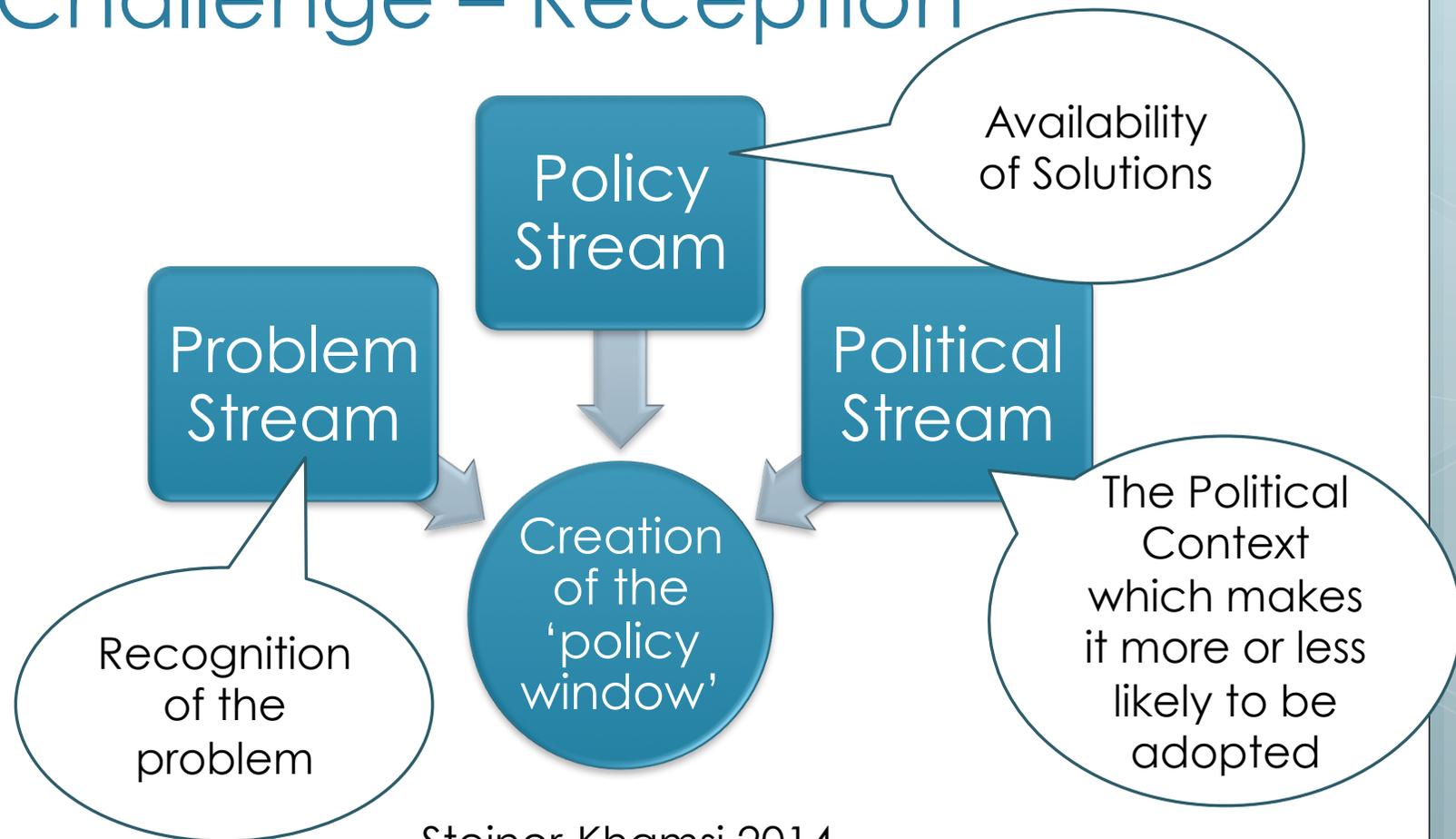
Tensions: Standardised tests

- Do they measure what they purport to measure?
- Do they lead to 'teaching-to-the-test' and a narrowing of the curriculum?
- Do they take the focus away from learning?
- How valuable is the data derived from them?
- What use is made of the data?
- Are they the right approach to evaluating the quality of teaching and learning?

A cautionary note

- To what extent can policy be borrowed from one context to another with an expectation that the same outcomes can be achieved especially given the widely differing educational policy landscape between Scotland and the remainder of the UK and the devolvment of policy on education to the Scottish Government?

The Scottish Attainment Challenge – Reception



Steiner-Khamsi 2014

Translation – the challenges

Policy borrowing is most likely to be successful when there is ‘some synchrony between the characteristics of the different education systems involved and the dominant political ideologies promoting reform within them’ (304)

Halpin and Troyna, 1995

The Policy Landscape

● England

- Privatisation of public schooling
- Diversity of forms of schooling
- Driven by market economy
- Data-driven
- Conflict between accountability (from the centre) and autonomy
- Localised governance – local authority role marginalised
- Characterised by conflict between policy makers and headteachers/teachers
- Discourse of 'failing schools', 'special measures' and 'requires significant improvement'
- Solution seen as parachuting in Superheads

● Scotland

- Affirmation of comprehensive schooling (**but** state funded autonomous schools?)
- Rejection of neo-liberal agenda
- Becoming more data-driven
- Conflict between accountability (from the centre) and autonomy (but to a lesser extent)
- Local authorities play more significant role
- More consensual approach
- More positive discourse – 'schools of ambition'
- Solution seen as building capacity through 'leadership at all levels'



Translation – the Challenges

- If a ‘pick and mix’ approach is adopted and there is a lack of fidelity to the initial approach, will the initial outcomes be realised?

Translation – the Challenges



- Getting the balance right between sensitivity and responsiveness to the new context and fidelity to the approach

Translation – the Challenges



- To what extent can the various components/ attributes of the London/ city challenge and how they interact with each other to make an intervention successful or not be determined without the danger of a reductionist approach which doesn't capture the 'bigger picture' and may under- or over-emphasise some variables and miss others completely?

Translation – the Challenges

- The degree to which the Scottish Attainment Challenge is likely to be successful may be mediated by:
 - ✧ power relations and tensions between public bodies and the roles of LA officers, national attainment officers, HEIs, school leaders and teachers on the ground
 - ✧ The degree to which policy becomes refracted as it is interpreted afresh at each level of the system
 - ✧ Competing narratives, ideological positions and policy initiatives



National Improvement Framework

- ◆ national priorities
- ◆ school leadership
- ◆ teacher professionalism
- ◆ school improvement
- ◆ parental engagement
- ◆ assessment of children's progress
- ◆ performance information

Donaldson Review of Teacher Professionalism

- Stresses the importance of leadership at all levels of the system and teachers as change agents

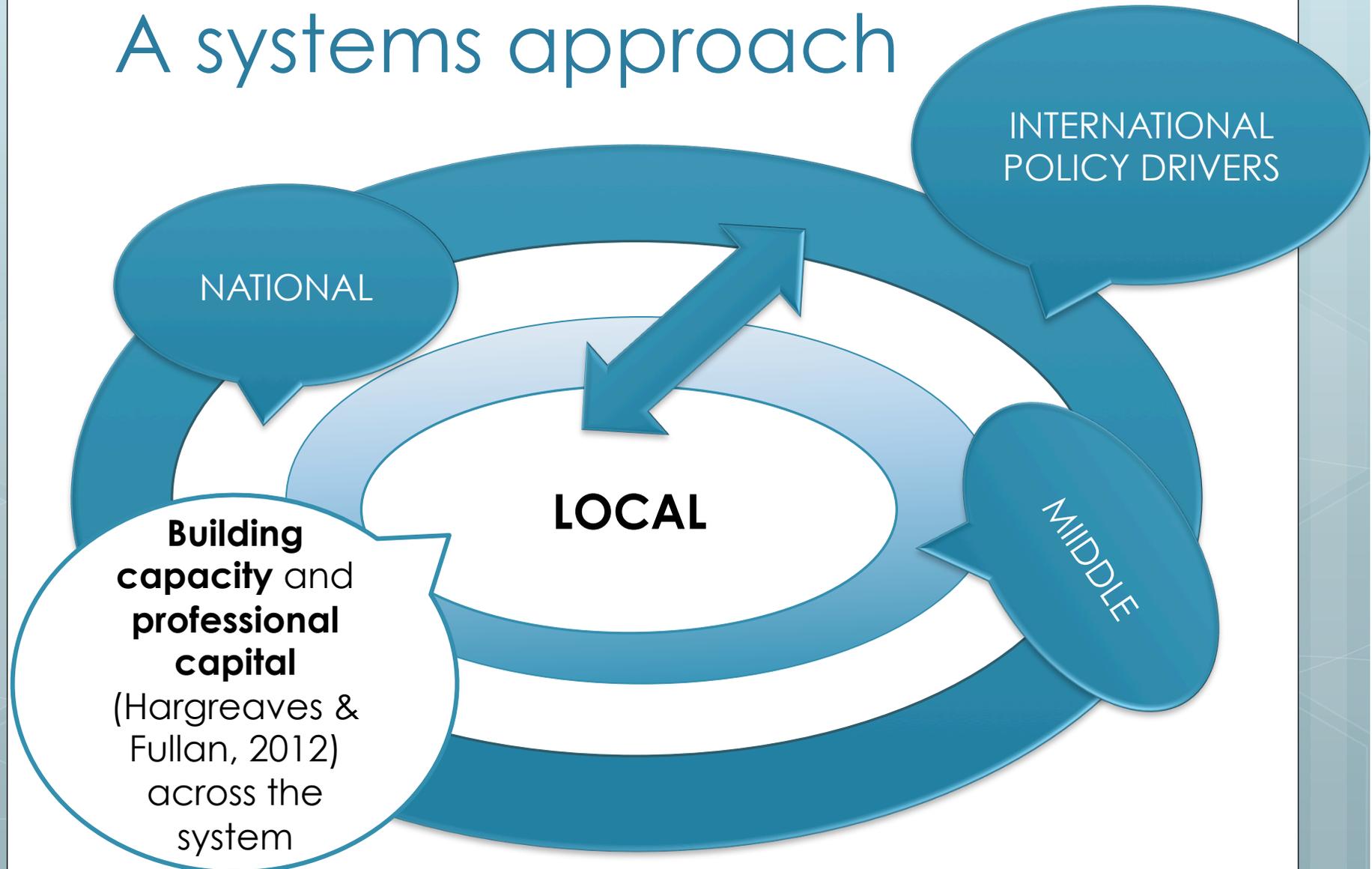
'.... evidence suggests, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the foundations of successful education lie in the quality of teachers and their leadership. High quality people achieve high quality outcomes for children.' (2) (Scottish Gvt., 2010)

Implications for Leadership

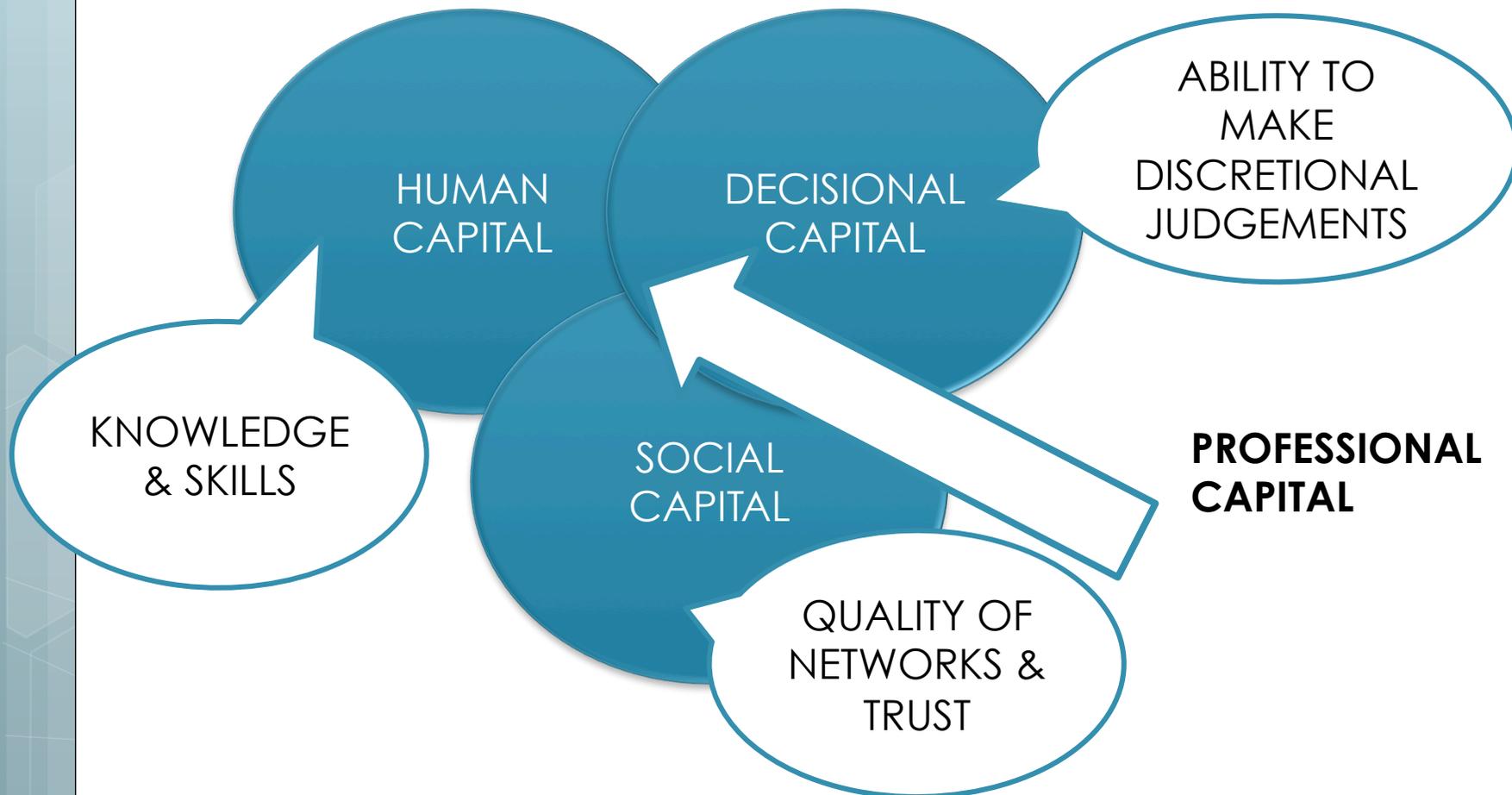
The need for a systems approach

- Given the scale of the challenge facing the Scottish Government, it is evident that 'schools cannot go it alone' and that a systems approach is required in which schools, local authorities, HEIs and the Scottish Government work in collaboration with each other and in partnership with parents and other agencies to ensure that an holistic approach is adopted

A systems approach



Professional Capital



Building capacity within the system



Not a narrow focus upon 'strategies' but upon challenging mindsets, norms and assumptions

- Figure 2: Slide 63 'Strengthen school leadership' from paper presented at the International Summit on the Teaching Profession, Wellington, New Zealand (A. Schleicher, 2014a)

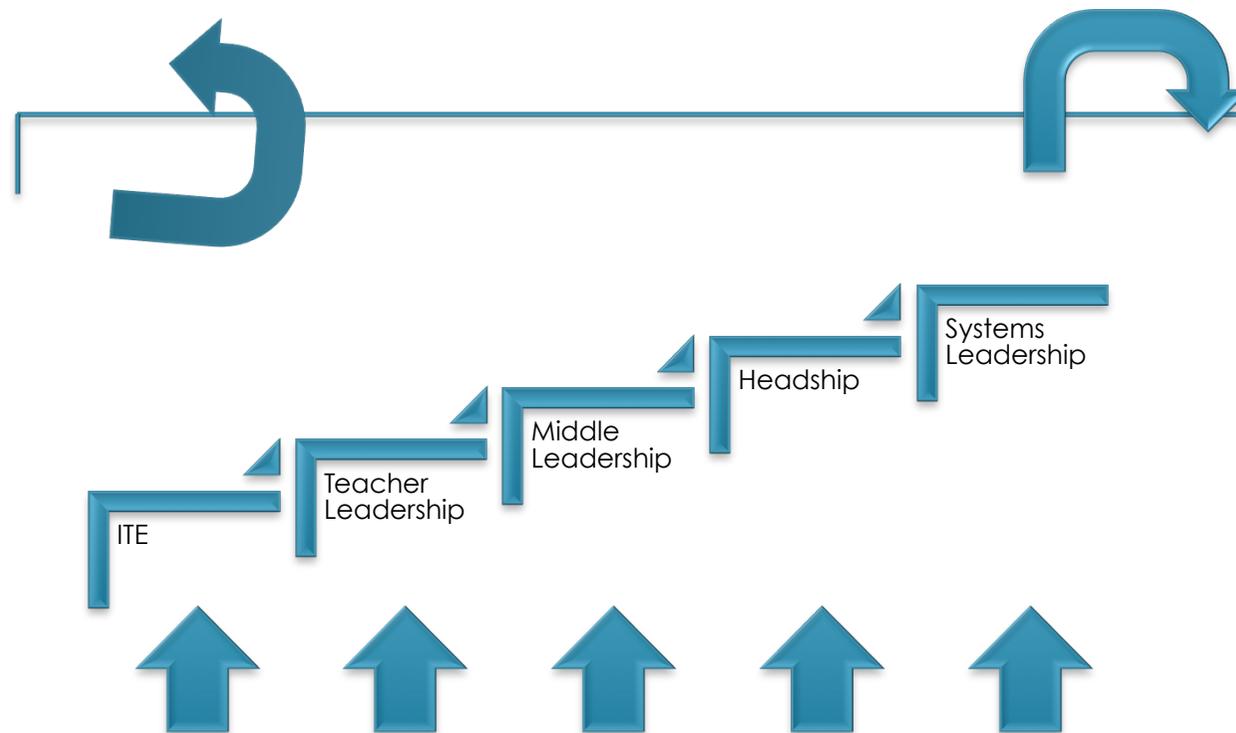
What distinguishes systems leadership from top-down approaches?

- Top-down approaches are predicated upon an over-simplistic model of change management which pays insufficient attention to the complexities of the policy process
- Change is understood as linear and unproblematic
- Too much emphasis is placed upon the school as a unit of change
- Too much emphasis is placed on the 'charismatic', 'transformational' leader who 'sells a vision'
- Insufficient attention is paid to issues of power, influence and authority
- Teachers and their leaders are cast in the role of passive implementers of policy, de-professionalising them but still holding them accountable

A new model of change – Systems leadership +

- Bringing together the best of what distributive leadership has to offer (a bottom-up emancipatory approach in which teachers are able to exercise agency and autonomy with appropriate accountability in which the role of senior leaders is to create an enabling culture) under the auspices of a systems-leadership approach which sets a clear direction for improvement and provides an infra-structure to enable collaboration and networking within and between different levels of the system.

Building capacity at the level of the system



Leadership and Moral Purpose

- Leadership with 'emancipatory intent' is based upon '*the moral imperative to make a difference for all children to ensure the marginalized and disadvantaged, for whatever reason, are given equal opportunities to both achieve academically and to develop mutually respectful relationships based on people-oriented values. It ... goes beyond what might be achieved by a highly regulated, managerial system measuring, monitoring and reporting school performance purely in terms of academic qualifications.*' (Fuller, 2012, 685).

Leadership and Moral Purpose

- Ainscow et al. (2012) argue that schools cannot go it alone and need to be 'nested within locally led efforts to make school systems more equitable and to link the work of schools with area strategies for tackling wider inequities and, ultimately, with national policies aimed at creating a fairer society. (211)

Conclusion 1

- Addressing the achievement gap requires systemic change at the level of society challenging deeply embedded inequalities and a political solution which is inclusive of but extends beyond education policy

Conclusion 2

- The starting point for any problem is to understand the problem at a deeper level. Parachuting in approaches from elsewhere and throwing resources at it won't result in the desired outcomes. Schools, local authorities, HEIs and government need to work collaboratively together for the good of all to come to a deeper understanding of why children may under-achieve and the barriers to their learning as a starting point for finding a solution to the problem.

Conclusion 3

- Systems leadership without a clear moral purpose is unlikely to rise above the scale of the challenge and must pay attention to the international, national and local levels, creating a broad framework which gives a clear sense of direction and rationale for change whilst being sensitive to context, providing sufficient flexibility at the local level and creating a culture in which innovation can flourish and is encouraged.

Conclusion 4

- A need for a 'joined-up' approach towards developing a research culture in schools which can ultimately promote innovative pedagogy and practice. This means that national bodies and HEIs need to work together and with schools to establish common understandings of what a 'research culture' looks like and how it can be realised in practice.

Conclusion 5

- Higher Education Institutions have an important role to play in this process and should be central to it. They should not be on the periphery of change.

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Key Questions

What are the challenges facing schools and local authorities in implementing the Scottish Attainment Challenge?



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How can research inform the Scottish Attainment Challenge?



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- What are the challenges facing schools and local authorities in implementing the Scottish Attainment Challenge?
- How can research inform the Scottish Attainment Challenge?
- How can schools, local authorities, HEIs and Scottish policy makers work more effectively together to ensure positive outcomes for children and young people?