High School Change: A Reflective Essay on Three Decades of Frustration, Struggle, and Progress

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Abstract

Purpose

This essay is dedicated to honoring, positioning, and reflecting on key themes related to high school reform within the career-long scholarship of Karen Seashore Louis. It is presented in relation to my own and others' key studies and book-length arguments regarding educational change, knowledge utilization, professional communities, and innovation, over the past 30 years and up to the present time.

Design/methodology/approach

The article examines and interprets major works by Karen Seashore Louis and other educational change theorists that address repeated systemic failures, and episodic outlier efforts, at transformational change in high schools.

Findings

High school change has only failed if it is judged by the overarching criterion of systemwide transformation. Fair assessments of high school change must also examine accumulated incremental innovations. In light of the need for transformational aspirations in schools to mesh with transformational directions in society, the global pandemic and its aftermath may provide five key opportunities for long-awaited transformation.

Originality

There are different levels and degrees of innovation. Incremental innovation is as important as wholesale transformation. The growing number of networked outliers of innovation raises questions about the false equation of whole system change with bureaucratic state reform. Although the influential literature on whole system change is rooted in a small number of English-speaking countries, transformational change on a systemwide basis already exists in Northern Europe and parts of the Global South. Last, the pandemic and other major disruptions to the global social order have produced conditions that are highly favorable to transformational change in the future.

Keywords

Educational Change

School Reform

High Schools

Secondary Education

COVID-19

Introduction

High schools (secondary schools) are hard to change. This has been a repeated complaint in the educational change and improvement literature for decades. Beginning with Karen Seashore Louis and Matthew Miles (1990) book on *Improving the Urban High School*, understandings have developed of what factors explain the ability of outlier high schools to improve or innovate. Explanations have also evolved about why high school innovation and change has not occurred on a large-scale, system-wide basis.

This article reviews key findings from Louis's coauthored book on *Improving the Urban High School*, it explores intersections with my own research on secondary school reform during and beyond the 1990s, and it situates both bodies of work in relation to book-length arguments within the wider field of educational improvement, innovation and high school change up to and beyond the present time. It is not a systematic literature review, nor does it supply references for every part of the narrative. Rather, it is an essay that uses Louis's scholarship as a springboard to inquire into longstanding issues of innovation, improvement and change in high schools to which Louis's work, among others, continues to speak.

High Rise

High schools are notorious Leviathans of educational change. Often unmanageable in size, bureaucratic and hierarchical in structure, compartmentalized into separate subject-based communities, and driven as well as riven by the selection and examination demands of higher education, high schools have frustrated reformers for over half a century.

In the late 1980s to early 1990s, research on educational change began to shift from focusing on curriculum change and innovation in mathematics, science, and humanities towards bringing about whole school change. US curriculum reforms in the 1960s Sputnik era and then the 1970s ultimately proved unsuccessful because there was no large-scale strategy for changing teachers' beliefs and practices in their classrooms or diffusing innovation beyond initial groups of enthusiasts. At the same time, while research on elementary school improvement in the mid-to-late 1980s pointed to the potential for building more collaborative cultures of teaching so teachers could make sense of innovative practices together, whole-school collaboration in larger high school communities proved more challenging.

From the 1960s, secondary schools in the US, Canada, UK and elsewhere grew, in size, to accommodate sufficient curriculum choice and educational opportunity for all. Ironically, this turned them into impersonal, bureaucratic, and internally stratified and selective institutions. Widespread and continuing student disengagement has resulted in high levels of dropout. The transition from elementary to secondary schools was also too abrupt. It threw young people into the bearpit of adolescence before they were ready. There were calls for high schools to change, but what would these changes look like, and what was needed to make them happen?

High Hopes and Disappointments

Various structural solutions were advanced to address the challenges that high schools faced. These included greater choice among different types of secondary schools, the creation of middle schools to enable a smoother transition between childhood and adolescence, designing smaller schools or schools-within-schools in the US to make the high school experience more intimate, connecting schools to their local cultures and communities, and using technological innovation to make high schools more flexible, personalized, practically relevant, and business-like.

Choice of schools, specialized program options, magnet schools, US charter schools, and English academies have created bright spots here and there, from time to time. But systems of choice also produced new forms of selection and inequality. In particular, the least desirable students who had the greatest learning needs, the most severe behavior problems, or simply parents who were unable or unwilling to support and advocate for them, often found themselves excluded or expelled from the most successful schools. And high performing schools were not always especially innovative either. Many were just high-end versions of what Tyack and Tobin (1994) called the existing "grammar of schooling" with its conventional school subjects, traditional assessment practices and age-graded classes.

Middle schools were introduced in the United States and England to try and smooth the transition to secondary school and provide a protected space for early adolescents. As my own doctoral research disclosed, though, staffing such schools with former elementary teachers and ex-high school teachers tended to recreate the different cultures of primary and secondary education within the same building (Hargreaves, 1986).

Smaller schools or schools-within-schools were developed to provide rigor, relevance, and better relationships. But attempts to create and support such schools at scale proved unsuccessful. Teachers who collaborated by choice to take on cross-disciplinary roles in innovative environments behaved very differently from colleagues with strong curriculum allegiances who felt they were

forced to abandon traditional subject identities and collaborate within claustrophobically small school environments (Ravitch, 2008).

Community high schools also attracted attention as ways to restructure education for adolescents. These schools reached out to, served, and became connected to their wider communities through making their facilities available to adults as well as students, and/or by designing locally relevant curriculum content, or partnering with other kinds of organizations. However, the investment and energy required to sustain these school environments across whole systems has often needed additional philanthropic, not-for-profit, or corporate support (Kania and Kramer, 2011; Henig et al; 2016). Another way to connect secondary schools to their community environment has been to integrate services for young people in medical care, law enforcement and social services on a single site. But when voluntary efforts supported by external grants were turned into regulatory integrations of education and child services systemwide, as was attempted in England, the results were less impressive (Munby, 2019).

Increasingly, *technology* has also been considered as a tool of high school transformation. But iconic examples like the network of schools that comprise High-Tech High in California remain atypical within the wider system (Wagner and Dintersmith, 2015).

High But Not Wide

Notwithstanding these outlier exceptions or innovative networks of like-minded institutions, secondary schools have proved hard to change on a systemwide scale. One reason is the nature and impact of school subjects.

In the 1980s, UK curriculum researchers explained how the organization of high school knowledge was abstract, decontextualized, and subject-based. This, they said, served the interests of middle-class elites. In addition, the history, politics, and identities of school subjects preserved, and perpetuated the conservative nature of high school communities by separating knowledge into compartments and by building strong subject allegiances and identities among high school teachers. In the US, the late Seymour Sarason stood almost alone in asserting that many of what he called these "regularities" of schooling, including secondary schooling, were rooted in deeply entrenched power relationships. "Schools will remain intractable to desired reform", he wrote, "as long as we avoid confronting their existing power relationships". (Sarason, 1990, p5)

In the 1990s, US researchers reinterpreted this socially critical work through a more abstract and less politically theoretical lens. Unlike their UK colleagues, these researchers did not seek to abolish, integrate, or transform subject departments, or to challenge the inequitable elitism that a traditional

curriculum served. Instead, they identified characteristics such as effective professional collaboration and leadership that helped consolidate subject departments even further.

Louis and Miles: Improving the Urban High School

What could be learned from schools that managed not just to tweak or strengthen their existing departmental structures but also to find ways to transform teaching and learning altogether? What structures, cultures and processes could support and sustain innovative designs and deeper learning over many years? This was the question that Karen Seashore Louis and her colleague Matthew Miles asked themselves when they undertook a cross-US study of continuously improving urban high schools in the 1980s.

Louis's and Miles's research team interviewed 178 US principals of urban high schools that had made sustained efforts at improvement for at least 4 years, and they carried out case studies of five of the schools. In addition to the common finding in organizational change studies - that there needs to be a vision of change that is widely shared throughout the community - three other conclusions stood out.

First, schools and districts needed to enjoy high degrees of professional autonomy from bureaucratic compliance, yet also be connected and engaged with each other. They needed to have what I call collective autonomy (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012).

Second, effective planning for improvement was not based on achieving distant goals in a linear-sequential way. It was evolutionary in nature – bearing the overall vision in mind, but planning a bit, doing a bit, then planning a bit more in action. Stevenson and Weiner (2020) also adopt this perspective in their more recent playbook for strategic planning in school districts.

Third, Louis and Miles argued, problems should be regarded as opportunities and treated as learning moments rather than as fatal flaws or insurmountable obstacles. "Problems are natural". Indeed, "problems are our friends", the authors claimed. When people raise problems "they should be treated seriously, and not stereotyped as simply exhibiting 'resistance'". (p268). Referring to a classic paper on three perspectives on school innovation by Ernie House (1981), Louis and Miles noted that problem-solving had three dimensions. *Technical* problems concerned issues in the schedule or concerning necessary training. C*ultural* problems called for strengthening relationships, building morale, and celebrating successes. *Political* problems of conflict and power struggles with the school district, for example, drew attention to the need to manage relationships.

Like Michael Fullan (1980), Louis and Miles understood that it was not just enough to have a rational strategy or plan for change. It was also important to have a "feel" for the change process. Vision, culture, and leadership ultimately held the keys to change, not revolutionary structures alone, with their promise to overturn subject-based traditions or high schools as we knew them. A clear purpose, relevance to people's lives and interests, images of what successful practice would look like, the will to make change happen, and the skill to do it well – these were what the insights of organizational development that had characterized Louis's own graduate training brought to the authors' change insights. More radical visions of secondary school curriculum reform that attacked subject elitism, hierarchies of knowledge, and vested professional interests, were not addressed by Louis's and Miles's work.

Although Louis and Miles include power considerations in explaining the presence of resistance to change, the nature of this power is rooted in organizational conflicts and interests more than in curriculum structures of inequality and injustice. These two perspectives – organizational and societal – can and should be integrated in a complementary way, as I attempted in my research on secondary school change throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s.

Researching the (Not So) High Life

In 1987, I moved from the UK to the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, in Canada, where I joined forces with a school board researcher, Lorna Earl, to take on a government contract for a rapid literature review of education for early adolescence. Our 1990 report – *Rights of Passage* – set out recommendations for a core, interdisciplinary curriculum organized around a small number of learning outcomes that would give teachers the latitude to design and develop learning in relation to the students they knew best (Hargreaves and Earl, 1990). It also recommended a shift from traditional forms of summative assessment towards more formative approaches that would support and stimulate learning rather than pass judgments once the learning was over. This was a transformational change.

Our report also issued warnings about the organizational obstacles to educational change with which Louis had also been concerned. For instance, we quoted the work of Louis's associate, Matt Miles, in his 1984 book with Michael Huberman, on *Innovation Up Close*, who argued that schools needed to "provide an environment which promotes and supports change" (Miles and Huberman, 1984. p12).

The government welcomed our report, distributed it to every school in the province, based much of its policy upon it, and then awarded a contract to us to evaluate Transition Years pilot projects in Grade 9. Our research team also conducted two related studies: secondary schools undertaking de-

streaming (or de-tracking) in Grade 9, and teachers committed to implementing Transition Years Reforms in Grades 7 and 8.

Our analysis of six pilot project cases (Hargreaves, Gerin-Lajoie and Thiessen, 1993) reported that

- De-streaming often amounts to teaching classes as if they are internally streamed.
- Subject departments exert a strong gravitational pull upon efforts at integration.
- Students perceive smaller schools-within-schools to be insufficiently grown-up.

These findings reiterated the claims of Tyack and Tobin (1994) that a "grammar" of schooling or what Mary Metz (1989) called "real school" had become so established and taken for granted among teachers and parents that any efforts to depart from it were met with teachers' pulling schools back towards the status quo. Implementation was most effective when a culture of strong, collaborative relationships among teachers and with students created a shared experience of the substance and process of change.

Our parallel study of the factors that affected the acceptance or rejection of de-streaming found that the most resistant environments were in or among:

- Traditional high schools with departmentalized subject structures and identities.
- Larger high schools where teachers worked within and not also across their own subjects.
- Schools serving elite middle-class communities.
- Teachers who had little contact with students in low stream or mixed ability classes.
- Schools that had not familiarized teachers with de-streamed practices elsewhere.

Change was implemented more successfully when structures and cultures of interdisciplinary collaboration were developed under inspiring leadership, and when teachers who were hesitant about change were introduced to examples of successful innovation elsewhere. These moves increased the collective learning that became a signature feature of Louis's unfolding work on knowledge-use and professional communities.

At the same time, these organizational changes need to be supplemented with ways to confront the political self-interests of privileged groups that want to preserve the kind of abstract and decontextualized curriculum. For example, when Allison Skerrett and I compared the high school English curriculum in Massachusetts with that in an Ontario secondary school in the broader change over time project, the authors of English literature texts were more likely to be White and Western, as students approached the selection point for university (Hargreaves and Skerrett, 2008).

A third study of Grade 7 and 8 teachers committed to Transition Years reforms (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore and Manning, 2001) concluded that the reform agenda was most likely to be successful when:

- Teachers were able and allowed to plan learning in relation to the in an improvisational way that bore the outcomes in mind while enabling them to respond to their students and draw on their own emotional enthusiasms (Louis's and Miles's evolutionary planning principles).
- Teachers received support from process consultants who could assist them with their curriculum planning (Louis's and Miles's principles of access to professional learning)
- Teachers worked under strong and inspiring leaders who could get them to collaborate in groups where they made sense of outcome statements together that otherwise felt mystifying when they had to be interpreted on their own (Louis's and Miles's strong support for effective leadership).
- Teachers were given scheduled time for collaborative sense-making and planning (Louis's and Miles's principle of collaboration).

Despite its inspirational and innovative design features, the Transition Years policy met the same fate of many other high school reforms. It failed to establish itself systemwide. Some of the reasons for this were organizational problems of time, culture, professional learning, and support. Yet, as Louis and Miles acknowledge, threats to high school change can also be political in terms of ideological differences over education and social policy.

Immediately after Ontario's only socialist government in history was elected in 1990, a lot of the business sector relocated south of the border and the government had to preside over the worst recession since the 1930s. Policies now had to be implemented within an austerity budget. Resources for investment in all the organizational processes Louis and Miles describe as being necessary, like professional learning, additional planning time, and coaching support, were now unavailable.

Implementation with inadequate support left teachers with insufficient time to plan, learn, or collaborate. Instead of de-streamed classes using innovative groupings or cooperative learning methods, most of them were taught on streamed principles, but with "normal", slower, and faster streams now occurring within classes instead of between them. Elite parents then became dissatisfied with what they were witnessing as higher achieving students were often left to organize their own learning while teachers coped with the rest of the class alone.

Largely funded by government and philanthropic grants, US studies of educational change and school improvement tend to focus on positive and progressive improvement efforts and the factors that affect success or failure in their implementation. The resulting knowledge base of change therefore tends to foreground abstract, systemic challenges of implementation such as shortages of time, inappropriate professional development, inflexible bureaucracies, shortfalls in leadership, and insufficient collaboration. Socially critical studies of educational reform are more likely to highlight problems with the political purpose, direction, and substance of educational change and its effects.

These two perspectives, rooted in organizational change and development on the one hand, and in critiques of the politics of educational reform on the other, are both essential for explaining why transformational secondary school reform repeatedly appears fails to occur systemwide.

Strong and Weak States

Throughout the 21st century, researchers have continued to lament the persistence of traditional grammars of secondary schooling, the absence of deep learning, and the failure to achieve secondary school transformation across whole systems such as countries, states, or large districts. For Michael Fullan (2000), large scale change is system-wide change that affects hundreds or thousands of schools within a geographically defined area. Although such change has been achieved in large-scale improvements in elementary school literacy that have built high level coalitions of political support, pursued relentless implementation, provided strong resourcing for coaching and collaboration, and communicated clear measures of progress and success, similar systemic improvements have not yet happened at the high school level or in relation to more complex learning goals.

UK professor David Hargreaves (2019) has less faith in state power. In *Beyond Schooling: an anarchist challenge*, he criticizes the relentless march from the mid 1970s onwards of ever- tightening state control over schools – right down to the details of curriculum content, standardized testing, and top-down inspection systems. England moved from being one of the least to one of the most centralized systems in the world, he argued (Hargreaves, D., 2009, p4). Semi-autonomous educational bodies responsible for curriculum, technology and leadership were all abolished or placed under direct government control. Ministers and civil servants assumed immense powers even over the details of classroom practice. Whether it is governed by the political Left or Right, Hargreaves argues, the state tightens surveillance and control, "damages spontaneous self-organization" (p15) and either obstructs innovation or incorporates "any innovations into itself, in order to control them" (p37).

For these reasons, Hargreaves is pessimistic about the possibilities for achieving educational transformation through tightly coordinated state policy. Instead, he proposes an anarchist alternative that puts people at the centre of being able to help themselves through association and cooperation. Hargreaves expresses this anarchist principle in three ways:

- *Homeschooling* that harkens back to the de-schooling movements of the 1970s. The experience of COVID-19, however, suggests that Hargreaves was over-optimistic about the potential of homeschooling to bring about widespread change. Remote learning during COVID-19 worked best for privileged families with strong networks of support and expertise or for students who were no longer susceptible to bullying (Vaillancourt, 2021). But, in most families, mothers who had to assume disproportionate responsibility for supervising their children's learning at home found it almost impossible to manage their own careers at the same time. One of the age-old reasons children need to be in public schools is custody (Dreeben, 1968). Schools are places where children can go so their parents can go to work.
- *Changes at the periphery* of systems "where exciting innovative practice flourishes" (p 149). Such innovations offer some promise, we shall see, but not necessarily in the way that David Hargreaves and many other innovation champions imagine.
- *Self-improving school systems (SISS).* These are built around clusters of schools that work together to develop local solutions under system leadership. With the evolution of networked systems of organization, there is potential for some aspects of SISS to combine innovation with systemwide change. In practice, though, as Hargreaves and other SISS analysts concede, neo-liberal governments can easily hijack the self-help narrative to justify austerity policies that reduce or withdraw vital supports for state schools (Supovitz, 2014; Ainscow, 2015; Greany and Higham; 2018).

In conclusion, although statism can be too constraining, in a starkly unequal society, the alternative of cooperative anarchism can easily be exploited for market-driven political ends.

A High Five for the Future

So, what are the future alternatives for high school improvement and transformation? What are the chances of overcoming the organizational obstacles to change that Louis and others have identified, and of confronting the dominant political interests that tend to maintain conventional high schools as they are? And how can those alternatives avoid top-down control by overbearing states on the one hand, or anarchist free-for-alls that exacerbate inequalities, on the other? This final section reviews

five alternatives, one of which refers to Louis's other research on knowledge utilization and professional communities.

Transformational Systems

In *The Education We Need for a Future We Can't Predict,* Tom Hatch (2022) turns to a question that Dennis Shirley and I posed in 2009 (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009, p10). "Should schools be improving what they already do, and undertake everything in their power to make it better, and more effective? Or should they be embracing innovation...not merely making their existing practice more effective, but transforming that practice and perhaps even the nature of their institutions altogether?" (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009; p.210). Hatch's answer is deceptively simple: "The challenges are so great that we have to do both" (p xxviii). "We need to both improve schools and transform education", he says. Incremental school improvement might be the normal run of affairs, but greater transformations can occur when "education systems and the efforts to improve them reflect the social, cultural, geographic, political, and economic conditions in which those improvement efforts take place" (p. 9).

Heavy-handed, state-controlled, top-down efforts at innovation may not work in cultures like England, Australia, and the US where inequality is high, social mobility is low, and cultures of individualism and private education are pervasive. But elsewhere, when values in society and education are aligned, and when educational change is an integral part of social transformation, then large scale change is and has been possible.

- After an economic collapse in the 1980s, *Finland* made a deliberate policy to transform itself through education. This led to the abolition of the top-down school inspection service, avoidance of high stakes testing, investment in, and trust towards highly qualified teachers who would all possess Masters' degrees, and time and support for effective professional collaboration. By the early 2000s, Finland had become a surprise star performer on OECD's international PISA results of educational achievement at age 15, which also drew attention to the country's high ranking on other indicators such as well-being, sustainable places to live, transparency, innovation, and lack of corruption (Sahlberg, 2011; Hargreaves, Halasz and Pont, 2008)
- Up to the start of this century, *Iceland* recorded extremely high levels of school dropout along with drug and alcohol abuse among its youth. The government responded by constructing leisure centers that provided after-school activities, free of charge, with qualified sports coaches. The *Huffington Post* noted that "from 1998 to 2016, the

percentage of 15-16-year-old Icelandic youth drunk in the past 30 days declined from 42% to 5%; daily cigarette smoking dropped from 23% to 3%; and having used cannabis one or more times fell from 17% to 5%." (Milkman, 2016). From having one of the worst records in the world on student well-being, Iceland now ranks as one of the best.

- After the collapse of the former Soviet Republic, *Estonia* became a world leader in technology. The country in which Skype was invented took a "Tiger Leap" in 1996 by promoting internet use, moving elections online, sponsoring digital citizenship by crowdsourcing the public's ideas, teaching coding from the age of 7, and making all the curriculum available digitally (Roonema, 2021; Gouedard, Pont and Viennet, 2020). This not only enabled Estonia to make a smooth transition to online learning during the COVID- 19 pandemic but also helps explain its positioning as Europe's highest performer on OECD's PISA results.

- In 2007, *Uruguay* became the world's first nation to introduce one laptop per child. It then established a national education agency that creates curriculum materials online –a lifesaver for teachers during the pandemic – and that produces innovative materials and coaching support, with and without technology, to stimulate educational innovation in large numbers of its schools (ARC Education Project, 2020).

- *Scotland* has rejected the high stakes standardized testing of its English neighbor, introduced more experiences of learning outdoors, become a leader in play-based learning in primary schools, collaborated closely with the teaching profession, and developed networks among its 30 districts that support each other's improvement. In line with First Minister Nicola Sturgeon's belief that quality of life and social prosperity are more important than increasing Gross Domestic Product, Scotland has also made well-being a parallel priority to student achievement (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2022). In the 2019 OECD PISA results, Scotland's performance in literacy showed one of the greatest increases among all participating systems.

Systemwide transformations may be difficult in highly competitive and unequal societies like England and the US where top-down control prevails and systemwide improvement only seems to work where the learning goals are easily measured and limited, such as in literacy attainment. Karen Seashore Louis, a fluent speaker of Dutch as well as English, understands that cultures and systems in other higher-performing countries like the Netherlands differ from those such as the United States. Yet, in the wake of COVID-19, big societal shifts and associated educational transformations may be coming everywhere.

Outliers and Inlays

Outside of transformational periods in history, Hatch urges his readers not to be disconsolate about the absence of wholesale improvement. In routine times, he argues, significant changes can still be made by promoting and expanding what he calls specific "high-leverage" changes that amount to micro-innovations in particular areas of the school's operation. Such changes can lead to "specific, concrete and visible improvements in the schools we have", Hatch claims (p. 7). Hatch includes after school programs, one-on-one tutoring support, and expanded learning time among changes that consistently lead to gains in student achievement, attendance, and equity. Positive change doesn't always have to transform everything at once.

Although innovative experiments are frequently dismissed for being little more than atypical outliers that disappear when leaders leave, when teachers move on, when resources are withdrawn, or when political support is removed, this does not mean they have no lasting influence or leave no legacy. In a study of change over three decades and more in eight Ontario and US secondary schools, my colleagues and I learned that although the early energy of innovative secondary schools did tend to dissipate over time, founding innovators in these schools carried what they learned with them to other schools, in their next jobs (Giles and Hargreaves, 2006; Fink, 1999; 2000). Indeed, innovative schools could become incubators for new leaders, who would go on to rise through the system, into senior leadership positions, where their transformational ideas about equity, inclusion, cooperative learning and more, helped to shape new educational policies in the future.

Programs *within* schools, as well as coaching and professional development supports *for* schools often benefit from recruiting educators who may have cut their innovative teeth elsewhere. This is what Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine (2019) found in their study of 30 US high schools. Although they hoped to discover embedded and institutionalized uses of deeper learning throughout their carefully chosen schools, they learned that many students were still disengaged much of the time, a lot of learning was surface rather than deep, and much of the traditional grammar of schooling persisted even in these places. At the same time, in line with Hatch's more incremental arguments, they found that innovative practices and examples of deeper learning existed *within* almost every school – in after-school activities, extra-curricular programs, academic options, teachers who taught the challenging International Baccalaureate curriculum, and so on. Perhaps in such cases, Hatch notes, if these in-school innovative inlays can be pulled together, coherently, "these micro-developments can accumulate to create new and unanticipated opportunities for systemic improvements in learning on a broad scale" when the time is ripe (p 76).

Networks

Aside from her work on high school reform, Karen Seashore Louis has also addressed how successful instructional practice and effective change knowledge can be used and disseminated. In a Handbook chapter on "Reconnecting knowledge utilization and school Improvement", Louis (2005) recaps traditional knowledge utilization theory that addresses how knowledge is produced and subsequently disseminated, and then examines what knowledge utilization looks like from an organizational learning perspective. What matters is not so much "where the knowledge comes from", or even "the linkage mechanism" to practice, she writes, but rather "the structures and culture that will encourage the development of a shared knowledge base that will guide collective action" (p53). One condition of successful knowledge use is "sustained interactivity" between developers and users within "formal and informal networks…that combine research knowledge and practice knowledge".

In an update of her chapter, a decade later, Louis noted that effective utilization depended on sustained interaction and collaborative cultures where teachers could learn about and make sense of changes together (Louis, 2010). She also highlighted the importance of social networks as mechanisms for diffusing innovations that resonated with practitioners among mixed groups of researchers, educators, and policymakers. The importance of professional learning communities in developing and diffusing innovation was consolidated in Louis's 2007 edited book with Louise Stoll on Professional Learning Communities, including, in one chapter, where learning communities were networked with each other (Jackson and Temperley, 2007).

Networks are not especially new in education. Hatch refers to several that he has been involved with throughout his career, including The Coalition for Essential Schools network committed to nine basic principles of school design, The (James) Comer Schools that connected schools to their communities, the Alliance Schools in Texas that pioneered community organizing in education, and the New Jersey Network of superintendents who tried to improve their schools using "instructional rounds" of classroom observation, and more besides. There have been many other networks over the years within the US alone, like the national Critical Friends group of teachers that has clear protocols to give each other mutual feedback, or the National Writing Project that Ann Lieberman and Diane Wood (2002) researched and supported.

Networks used to be outlier structures for outlier schools and teachers – ways to gather eccentric or innovative schools and teachers together into one loosely structured oddball organization outside the mainstream. But in the 21st Century, networks have become more integral to state policy, a significant alternative to it, and a parallel form of large-scale organizational change altogether.

Networks have expanded almost exponentially in the information age. Digital technology has

increased and expanded communication and communication networks in what Manuel Castells (1996) anticipated was becoming a "network society" even by the 1990s. Network analysis has expanded accordingly to understand how organizations, professional communities, and relations among schools and teachers operate. In Stoll and Louis's book, Jackson and Temperley (2007) analyzed and advocated for networked learning communities as ways for schools to co-organize their own improvement efforts. Not all networks are positive, of course. As Castells notes, criminals and terrorists operate through networks. Less dramatically, in education, high status parents can resist interdisciplinary or other changes that threaten their interests by organizing through networks too.

Networks organized to initiate and manage improvement and change have started to spring up everywhere. As an illustration, here are just some educational networks that I have worked with since 2005.

- *The Raising Achievement, Transforming Learning Network*, established by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust in the UK in the early 2000s, sought to raise achievement in 300 underperforming secondary schools. The schools were networked with each other for mutual support, paired with self-chosen higher-performing mentor schools, and provided with menus of effective practical improvement strategies. Our evaluation showed that two thirds of the schools improved at double the rate of the national average, but the network was less successful in achieving long term transformation than it was in making short-term improvement. (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009)

- *The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI)* was established through collaboration between the Alberta Teachers' Association and the Alberta Government's education department to promote teacher-driven innovation across the province. The initiative, which ran for almost 15 years, involved teachers in 95% of the province's schools. It required all projects to be collaboratively designed, to be reported and reflected on by educators, and to be shared with other schools at an annual meeting. My team's evaluation was methodologically unable to disentangle the initiative's impact on student achievement or engagement from the province's many other improvement measures. However, it did show positive impact of AISI on teacher motivation and morale in a system that sustained a strong record on OECD's international PISA results in student performance and on its measures of teachers' work culture (Hargreaves and Shirley, 2012).

  The New York Performance Standards Consortium (undated) comprises 38 high schools serving 30,000 students in New York State that certifies students' high school graduation with alternative assessments. These do not take the form of standardized examinations but are developed by practitioners and externally reviewed. One of the co-founders of the Consortium in 1998, a self-styled alternative high school, is one of the schools that

participated in the earlier-mentioned study of 8 secondary schools' experiences of change over long periods of time. This school co-founded the network to secure state waivers from the newly designed competency-based examinations that was restricting teachers' capacity to respond to their diverse student communities.

- *The Northwest Rural Innovation and Student Engagement (NW RISE) network* of over 30 remote rural US schools was created to improve student achievement. Dennis Shirley and I supported The Northwest Comprehensive Center from 2012-2019, along with state education representatives and leaders from schools and districts in five participating states, to try and raise achievement by developing students' engagement with their learning, their communities, and their lives. The schools met in two face-to-face weekend meetings per year, and online in between, to plan and then reflect on curriculum and other improvements in "job-alike" groups of subject-based, grade-based, or role-based educators (Shirley and Hargreaves, 2021). In a 2017 survey, over 93% of participating educators reported that the network had resulted in improvements in teacher and student engagement and student learning (Hargreaves, 2021 p 31).

Currently, I am also co-developing networks comprising a third of Nova Scotia's schools that are implementing the province's ambitious inclusion policy, a statewide network of teachers in New South Wales who have adopted lead roles to help their colleagues implement a new curriculum, and a cross-Canada network of 40 schools serving 12,000 students to explore and embrace play-based learning with high needs populations beyond the early childhood years. These networks are just the ones with which I have a direct connection. There are so many more outside of my own immediate experience.

As these examples illustrate, networks may be constructed by state agencies to assist implementation efforts, they can arise from voluntary initiatives by teachers or schools, or they can emerge from investments by philanthropies, not-for-profits, or private companies who want to recruit schools to networks that advance learning or well-being. All these networks serve large numbers of students, teachers, and schools, and sometimes encompass whole systems. Networks are no longer exceptions to traditionally run state systems. They are substantial, fluid, and flexible systems involving various degrees of self-organizing in and of themselves. At their best, these networks offer the rudiments of David Hargreaves's and others' self-organizing school systems that differ from traditional hierarchical bureaucracies

Movements

Self-improving school systems and educational networks may not always be innovative, equitable or inclusive. They may too easily accept government parameters of policies that are harmful to students such as win-lose parental competition among schools, high stakes standardized tests, or indiscriminate adoptions of digital learning technologies. How we can we be confident that self-improving school systems aren't innovative for their own sake, and don't benefit privileged schools more than others? How can self-improving school systems become truly transformative in an inclusive, humanistic, and equitable way?

One answer can be found in the idea of social movements. Social movements are grounded in senses of moral purpose and commitment that are meant to benefit everyone. As Byrne (1997) argues, "Social movements are expressive in that they have beliefs and moral principles and they seek to persuade everyone – governments, parents, the general public, anyone who will listen – that these values are the right ones." Social movements challenge and resist prevailing ways of governing that serve elite and privileged interests. They are evident in the labor movement, in environmental movements of climate change activism, in the women's and #MeToo movements, and in the global influence of Black Lives Matter.

Social movements are also evident in education. Dennis Shirley's (1997) research on community organizing in education, has shown how the Alliance Schools in Texas in the 1990s mobilized parents of marginalized children to focus on and secure quick wins together as part of a longer-term struggle for equity and inclusion. Social movements from below can be a powerful strategy for bringing about transformational change in education outside conventional state mechanisms of top-down implementation.

In *Liberating Learning: educational change as social movement,* Santiago Rincon-Gallardo (2019) examines powerful examples of systemwide transformation in the Global South that have been achieved through social movement principles. Global policy rhetoric has asserted that countries in the Global South can only improve with top-down strategies of curriculum prescription, implementation targets and standardized testing because they typically have weak teacher capacity. Against this view, Rincon-Gallardo describes large-scale changes that have achieved measurable improvements by identifying and moving around the knowledge and capacities that teachers already possess, rather than imposing programs to compensate for capacities these teachers supposedly lack.

One example is the *Escuela Nueva* group of over 20,000 rural schools that is rooted in but has expanded far beyond Colombia. In a system that has grown over 40 years, these schools do not only

outperform comparable schools in conventional achievement, according to World Bank data. They have also transformed pedagogy in ways that build on and cohere with the foundational ideas of John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and Maria Montessori. They focus the curriculum on pursuing transformational goals of securing peace, democracy, and connection to local rural environments, in part by involving students in school governance. These values define the movement, continue to be advocated globally by Escuela Nueva's inspirational and multi-award-winning co-founder, Vicky Colbert, and they motivate teachers to respond to the needs of their local communities. In a case study of Escuela Nueva, Michael O'Connor and I report how transformational practices are developed and circulated through demonstration lessons in local teachers' centres that teachers will ride over the mountains on their motorcycles to witness and discuss (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018).

A second example is the *Mexico Learning Communities Project*, of which Gallardo was formerly a key leader. The LCP was co-founded in 2003 by Gabriel Camara, a close friend of Paulo Freire and an acolyte of the 1970s libertarian intellectual, Ivan Illich who famously proposed the de-schooling of society in favour of networks of peer learning and "conviviality". At its height, the LCP included over 9,000 rural schools. Rincon-Gallardo describes the core pedagogy of LCP as follows. "Each student chooses a topic from a catalogue of topics that at least one tutor in the group masters. The students follow an individual line of inquiry with the support of the tutor" (p30) who builds on the student's prior knowledge, injects additional material, and provokes reflection on the learning process. Teachers and students act as learners and tutors for each other at different points, depending on their grasp of the topic.

In both these cases, people, ideas, strategies, and initiatives increasingly moved into the mainstream government system. Social movement and state reform began to blend into each other. In an age of advanced digital communication, these intersected ways of bringing about educational transformation through networks and movements will no longer be outliers, but they will become part of a more flexible and fluid system. This is especially likely given the traumatic impact on education of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Post-COVID Educational Transformation

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted every aspect of schooling worldwide, including existing theories, understandings, and practices of educational change. The pandemic disrupted many taken-for-granted understandings of educational change.

First, conventional understandings of educational change, including Louis's and my own, were that sustainable transformational change was necessarily slow. People needed time to understand

changes, adjust to them, connect them to pre-existing practice, and become proficient. But the pandemic showed that transformational change can and sometimes must be swift. Vaccines were invented and produced within months. Teachers converted to virtual, at home-learning pedagogies in a matter of days, in some cases.

Second, coping with pandemic changes threw teachers into collaborating with each other. Their governments and leaders were not the experts on what to do next. Teachers, themselves, were. Everywhere, teachers collaborated more than they had been doing previously. Even in atrocious circumstances, they believed they could still make a difference together in their students' lives. The long-standing support for collaboration and professional community that both Louis and I advanced, gained an extra surge from the pandemic.

Third, the systems that collaborated most effectively governed collaboratively, with policymakers, teacher unions, health professionals and other partners meeting regularly and taking collective responsibility for decisions, including mistakes, in uncertain circumstances together. Collaboration mattered politically as much as it did professionally.

Fourth, well-being and social and emotional learning ascended in educational priority to being a prime educational outcome, not just as a support for academic learning, but as something with paramount importance of its own. This includes the well-being of the adults in schools too. In addition to teacher learning, teacher wellness will become a significant factor in the future management of educational change.

Fifth, COVID-19 has transformed our assumptions about and attitudes towards digitally based learning. On the one hand, learning at home led to millions of teachers and students acquiring and enhancing capacities in digitally based learning at a keystroke. Yet problems of excess screen-time, student motivation, difficulties providing adequate supervision at home, and the emotional needs for in-person community among young people, had a chastening effect on those whose aspirations for technological transformations of learning had previously seemed almost unlimited. The result will be an increased but also more intelligent and ethical approach to technology use as an aspect of educational transformation.

Sixth, the need to suspend high stakes tests and examinations due to the restrictions of learning at home is leading many systems to review the age-old systems of examinations and testing that had previously seemed an immutable part of the grammar of schooling. National reviews of assessment worldwide are looking more closely at the capability of technology to provide algorithmic feedback on simple skills and knowledge, along with means to share images of work that teachers can make

collective judgments about through their newly enhanced collaboration. The backwash effect of end-of-high school examinations and tests that made high schools so hard to change in the 1990s, may finally be undergoing a seismic shift.

Last, the pandemic is not the only change facing the world and its students. Climate change, racism, xenophobia, insupportable levels of extreme inequality, global threats to democracy, and the future of work in a world of artificial intelligence are all issues that concern our young people. More than two thirds of them are fearful about the future (Marks et al, 2021). A huge generational shift is underway in what young people care about, what motivates them, and what they want their schools to address beyond basic content knowledge, certification, and university success. We are now in one of those moments that Hatch identified where ideological transformations in society will increasingly drive transformational changes and not just incremental improvements in all our schools.

High Time

In a long and distinguished career, Karen Seashore Louis has made major contributions to several key fields in education, including high school reform, organizational learning, knowledge utilization, and professional learning communities.

In the thirty years since the appearance of *Improving the Urban High School*, the possibilities for faster and more effective organizational learning have become greater. Knowledge utilization, now understood as knowledge mobilization has become more embedded in the culture and communities that Louis knew were important. It has also become more attentive to evidence, in a world where researchers don't just disseminate knowledge to practitioners but work alongside them in developing and applying knowledge together. The value of professional learning communities has been strengthened even further during the pandemic as teachers have turned to each other to respond to the massive disruption that confronted them. The assessment constraints on high school curriculum and pedagogy have been disrupted. Last, the growing realization of the young that our world is in turmoil and our existence is in peril is beginning to shift public education policy from making incremental improvements in measured achievement results to developing students' knowledge about, participation in, and capacity to bring about positive changes in the wider world.

For more than three decades, transformative change existed on the margins of educational systems. It is increasingly moving towards the core of policy and practice. Like all of us, Louis should be apprehensive and vigilant about the future. But she should also feel vindicated that the transformative educational changes for which she has always advocated, and that are needed more than ever to protect our future, may finally be within our grasp.

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