

Creating system change to improve schooling outcomes in Aotearoa New Zealand

Rob McIntosh

Victoria University of Wellington

Recent history of schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand has seen ongoing efforts to achieve improvement in learning outcomes, and particularly reduction in the inequity of outcomes between different groups of learners, without significant sustained progress. Over recent decades the literature on schooling system improvement has increasingly identified key factors that have contributed to improved learning outcomes in systems where this has been achieved. An assessment of Aotearoa New Zealand's experience against both the "what" and the "how" of effective system improvement suggests that the Aotearoa New Zealand experience aligns with some, but not all, of the identified aspects of successful change. This points to areas for greater focus and new approaches to change management in order to achieve sustained improvement in learning outcomes in the future.

Introduction

Achieving schooling system change in Aotearoa New Zealand remains a priority, given continued concerns about learning outcomes and particularly ongoing inequity in outcomes. Other challenges relating to student engagement and wellbeing and the need for schooling to adapt to global trends in society, work, technology and the environment, reinforce this.

Schooling improvement research internationally has increasingly focused on systemic improvement (Hopkins et al., 2014), as international assessment studies have facilitated cross-country comparisons. This has created a better understanding of the key influences associated with sustained improvement in outcomes. Schooling systems that have been successful at achieving improvement "select a critical mass of interventions from the appropriate menu and then implement them with fidelity" (Mourshed et al., 2010, p. 26).

While recognising that schooling system improvement efforts in Aotearoa New Zealand need to take account of the local context, and particularly the role Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi) must play in the future of the system, the literature on schooling improvement can provide insights for future attempts at system improvement here. Drawing on this literature, this paper discusses Aotearoa New Zealand's experience with schooling improvement, and how effectiveness in system improvement might be enhanced in the future.

Aotearoa New Zealand's experience relative to key factors associated with schooling system improvement

This section discusses some of the factors frequently identified in the literature as key to schooling system improvement, followed by comment on Aotearoa New Zealand's experience in relation to each factor.

Vision and purpose

According to a recent Brookings publication, "Multiple studies in and outside of education have highlighted the importance of developing a widely shared understanding of a system's purpose and goals for enabling true transformation that endures over time" (Sengeh & Winthrop, 2022, p. 10). Hopkins (2022) says successful systems "have developed a robust narrative related to the achievement and learning of students expressed as moral purpose, which is predicated on an unrelenting commitment to ensure that all learners will reach their potential" (p. 13).

Aotearoa New Zealand experience: There have been various attempts to create a vision and purpose for the schooling system over the last twenty years, including in the 2007 New Zealand Curriculum document (Ministry of Education, 2007, pp. 7-8) and the Education Conversation consultations in 2018 (Hipkins, 2018). In addition, several strategies have targeted improved outcomes for specific population groups (e.g., Ka Hikitia and the Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020–2030¹).

One indicator of progress in realising desired system-level outcomes is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Progress in Student Achievement (PISA) study, which maps trends in achievement of 15-year-olds since the early 2000s. PISA results show a statistically significant decline in the mean score for all Aotearoa New Zealand learners over that time, and continuing large discrepancies in achievement between learners from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds (May et al., 2019).

That the system vision and goals that have been set out, particularly as they relate to improved equity of outcomes, are yet to be realised suggests that they and/or the accompanying supporting actions have not sufficiently impacted policy and practice at either a national or local level.

Curriculum and assessment

The importance of systems providing clear direction on expected learning outcomes and ensuring effective assessment of outcomes is frequently highlighted in the literature. Robinson et al. (2011) state, "In improving systems, the belief that all students can and should learn is made concrete through the formulation of standards that describe what all students at different ages should know and be able to do" (p. 274). Aligned with this, other writers (e.g., Mourshed et al., 2010; Bishop et al., 2010) have noted the importance of assessment tools and practices to measure progress against such standards and that continue to improve practice.

Aotearoa New Zealand experience: National curricula provide universal standards within the schooling system in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, outcome expectations are

¹ The most recent iterations of these strategies can be found at [Ka Hikitia – Ka Hāpaitia – Education in New Zealand](#) and [Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020–2030 – Education in New Zealand](#)

expressed at a high level, with the intention of giving individual schools autonomy in how they implement the curricula at a local level.

In assessing the benefits and risks of more or less curriculum autonomy, Sinnema (2015) notes that one risk associated with greater curriculum autonomy is that “teachers’ desire for autonomy might not be matched by their capacity and expertise” (Sinnema, 2015, p. 972). Since the current curricula were promulgated, there has been recognition that at least some teachers do require more guidance than the national curricula alone provide. For example, the Literacy Learning Progressions (Ministry of Education, 2010) were developed to provide more guidance to teachers on specific expectations for learner knowledge, skills and attitudes. The current Curriculum Refresh is looking to provide literacy and numeracy progress steps, along with statements of essential pedagogies (Ministry of Education, 2023). Common practice models are also being developed.

In terms of assessment, a range of assessment tools are available for schools to use, but there is still variability in assessment practice. Commenting in 2018 on trends in the collection and use of assessment in primary schools over the previous decade, the Education Review Office stated that “although considerable improvements have occurred ... some schools continued to face challenges in improving the quality of their assessment practices (Education Review Office, 2018a, p. 49).

Overall, it appears that providing schools with clear direction on expected learning outcomes, and securing effective assessment of whether those outcomes are being achieved, remains a work in progress.

Classroom practice

Sengeh and Winthrop (2022), noting that education reforms often involve a lot of action without much impact, say “This is, as multiple studies point out, because the reform efforts often do not end up actually shifting the teaching and learning experiences of young people” (p. 16). This highlights the importance of system improvement impacting classroom practice.

Looking at what change in classroom practice requires, Coburn (2003) has emphasised that sustained improvement in outcomes requires deep change meaning “change that goes beyond surface structures and procedures ... to alter teachers’ beliefs, norms of social interaction and pedagogical principles” (p. 4). In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, this needs to include “a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations” (Bishop et al., 2010, p. 40).

Aotearoa New Zealand experience: Enhancing teaching practice has been a focus in Aotearoa New Zealand in recent decades. Between 2000 and 2010, there were several significant professional development initiatives. The largest were the Numeracy Development Projects, which it is estimated had reached around 95% of primary schools by 2009 (Wylie, 2021, p. 190). While the projects showed improvement in achievement on their own measures, the average score for Aotearoa New Zealand learners in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study in 2006 showed little change relative to 2002 (Wylie, 2012, p.192), and has not shown improvement since (Rendall et al., 2020), raising questions about the ongoing impact of the projects. Wylie (2012) notes that some schools were less successful than others in embedding and sustaining the learning from the projects and “Low-decile schools struggled to do so more than others and were less likely to have the mathematics leadership needed within their own staff” (p. 192).

Examples of other nationally-led professional development programmes showing positive results are Te Kotahitanga focused on raising Māori student achievement in secondary schools (Alton-Lee, 2015) and the Literacy Professional Development Programme in the second half of the 2000s (Meissel et al., 2016). However, despite the positive impact of these programmes, it is not clear that they have been leveraged to achieve ongoing system-wide impact.

In recent years, the system for professional development of teachers has focused more on distributing resources for professional development to schools and Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako². This is to enable greater tailoring to local needs, through schools procuring professional development from accredited providers and expert partners.

What appears to be needed for professional development in key areas to be impactful in the future is a combination of the best of what we have experienced in the past. This requires, at a national level, investment to be made in the research-based development of professional learning models that can then be implemented at the scale, and of the duration, required to bring the sort of deep change to which that Coburn (2003) refers, while also being implemented in a manner that takes account of local contexts and builds sustainable collaborative learning cultures.

Families/whānau and communities

Barton et al. (2021) state “Years of research indicate that family-school engagement can result in positive outcomes for student academic achievement and socio-emotional development” (p. 4). Mapp and Bergman (2021) suggest three principles for effective family-school engagement: schools must reject deficit-based views of families; family-school engagement should reflect a co-design model of engagement; and family-school engagement must be considered a core element of equitable and effective education (p. 7-8).

Aotearoa New Zealand experience: The important role that family and community play in learning has been recognised in schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand for at least two decades. For example, the schooling strategy released in 2005 identified as one of its three priorities for action, “families and whānau nurturing their children’s learning” (Mallard, 2005).

Over time, some specific initiatives in this area have included information campaigns to encourage parents in supporting their tamariki’s (children) learning, advice and guidance to Kāhui Ako on the importance of partnerships with whānau (family), iwi (tribe) and Pacific community groups³, and Education Review Office documentation of excellent practice in building learning partnerships with parents (Education Review Office, 2018b). In recent years the Government has funded the provision of Early Reading Together[®] and Reading Together[®] Te Pānui Ngātahi⁴.

Overall, however, such initiatives do not appear to represent a comprehensive action plan in this area.

² For information on Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako see [About Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako – Education in New Zealand](#).

³ [Partnering with families, employers, iwi and communities – Education in New Zealand](#)

⁴ [Reading Together / School-initiated supports / System of support \(incl. PLD\) / Kia ora - NZ Curriculum Online \(tki.org.nz\)](#)

Leadership

According to Robinson et al. (2011), “in high performing systems, there is strong emphasis on helping leaders make the shift from administrative to instructional leadership” (p. 725). Along with this, Fullan (2021) highlights, as a key driver for system improvement, “systemness,” which he says implies that all levels of the system “are essential for and have independent, and conjoint responsibility for changing the system” (p. 34).

Aotearoa New Zealand experience: System-level leadership development in schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand has been limited since 1989. While there have been some principal development initiatives such as the long running First Time Principals Programme, “We have few formal and planned structures to develop and sustain school leaders” (Tomorrow’s Schools Independent Taskforce, 2018, p. 18). This absence is particularly notable in the area of instructional leadership capacity.

In addition, the self-managing schools framework under which schools have operated for the last thirty years has worked against rather than for the “systemness” to which Fullan (2021) refers. “A focus on ‘one school, one board’ rather than on the collective interest of the network of schools in the wider community causes unhealthy competition and often impacts on already disadvantaged children and their families” (Tomorrow’s Schools Independent Taskforce, 2018, p. 12).

The requirement for Communities of Learning|Kāhui Ako to agree on shared goals for student achievement is important to changing the dynamics to which the Taskforce refers. Further moves to build the commitment of all leaders at all levels to system-wide improvement, as part of a systemic approach to developing system leadership, would be beneficial.

Accountability

Appropriate accountability arrangements have also been emphasised as important to system improvement. Robinson et al. (2011) note that, while there is wide variation across systems in accountability policies, “the common theme is a shift from more bureaucratic top-down forms to more emphasis on accountability to internalised professional norms, to peers and to parents and students” (p. 725). And they further note “in systems with public accountability for performance on standards, higher levels of school discretion are associated with higher performance. In systems without such accountabilities, higher levels of autonomy are associated with lower student achievement” (p. 725).

Aotearoa New Zealand experience: In the highly devolved schooling system in Aotearoa New Zealand, local Boards of Trustees are primarily responsible for providing accountability for performance, supported by review from the Education Review Office. Writing in 2018, the Tomorrow’s Schools Independent Task Force stated that “current methods of evaluating schools and the schooling system are inadequate” (p. 20) and that “many boards do not have the capacity and capabilities to do what is required of them” (p. 12). Since 2018, the review methodology of the Education Review Office has shifted to working more in partnership with schools in an ongoing way, rather than periodic review⁵, consistent with recommendations of the Task Force. But given the overall architecture of the system, there is still a risk that current arrangements align more with what Robinson et al. (2011) noted are the conditions associated with lower achievement.

⁵ www.ero.govt.nz/how-ero-reviews/schoolskura-english-medium

The further growth in professional accountability, which Robinson et al. (2011) note is a trend internationally, would appear to be a desirable direction for the schooling system in Aotearoa New Zealand to pursue, even within the context of strong school self-management.

Networks and collaboration

In this and other respects, professional networks and collaboration appear important for system improvement. Hopkins (2022) says that “it is becoming clear that networks support improvement and innovation” (p. 19). This is reinforced by Burns et al. (2016) who say “Horizontal capacity building is becoming increasingly important in complex systems striving for educational improvement” (p. 130). Additionally, Mourshed et al. (2010) observe that systems that have successfully pursued an improvement journey “have increasingly come to rely upon a “mediating layer” that acts between the center and schools” (p. 28).

Aotearoa New Zealand experience: A regular survey of teaching, school and principal leadership practices shows that opportunities for professional collaboration are increasing. In particular, in 2021, 61% of teachers in schools belonging to Kāhui Ako rated opportunities to collaborate with other teachers very well or well, compared with 46% in 2017 (Wylie & Coblenz, 2022, p. 34). While this improvement is positive, opportunities to collaborate are still not the experience of a significant number of teachers.

With respect to a mediating layer, the Aotearoa New Zealand system continues to be characterised by the absence of such a layer, which is by definition separate to central agency functions, such as the Ministry of Education’s regional network. While the Tomorrow’s Schools Independent Task Force’s proposal to establish larger regional entities as a form of a mediating layer was not progressed, there are other possible models for such a layer. A mediating layer need not be involved in school governance, but rather be a responsive service provider, working in partnership with schools to help improve practice, including sharing effective practice across schools, strengthening data analysis, supporting local community and iwi engagement, and enhancing two-way communication between schools and government agencies. Mediating layer entities could themselves collaborate so as to foster knowledge transfer about effective practice more widely across the system.

Aotearoa New Zealand’s experience of school sector change management

The previous section has discussed some of the key system settings identified in the literature as bringing about change, but the literature is also increasingly emphasising that how change is managed is critical to effecting change. This section discusses some key characteristics that have been identified as features of successful change management.

Coherence and alignment of change initiatives are highlighted by a number of writers, so as to enable the individual components of a change programme to work together to enhance the collective impact of the whole. Burns et al. (2016) identify factors that increase alignment including participatory governance to foster common understanding, a shared agenda for comprehensive implementation, open dialogue for long term strategy, aligned capacity building at all levels, and feedback and policy flexibility. Conversely, they say factors that increase fragmentation include diverging views on the nature of attainment targets, lack of ownership, flawed implementation and disconnected capacity building initiatives (p. 63).

Several writers identify values alignment as particularly important. Drawing on a number of contributors to the field, Barton et al. (2021) say “Given that change fundamentally challenges existing norms and behaviours, the change process at its core demands a system-wide aligned shift in the beliefs and values that drive behaviour” and highlight the importance of including a wide group of stakeholders in this process (Barton et al., 2021, p. 22). Nevertheless, it is essential that teachers are central to such processes because “Not only are teachers best positioned to share insights on what could or could not work in redesign but ... motivating essential actors to embrace change is key to successful sustained change” (Sengeh & Winthrop, 2022, p. 17).

A further characteristic of successful change management is the importance of striking a balance between different levels of the system. Hopkins (2022) says “neither top-down nor bottom-up change works when conducted in isolation; they have to be in balance, in a creative tension” (p. 16) noting that the right balance will depend on the context at the time. Trust is essential to achieving successful policy reform in complex devolved systems (Burns et al., 2016, p. 148) and can be important in achieving the needed balance between different levels of the system.

Aotearoa New Zealand experience: Scanning the last two decades, it appears system improvement could have been more closely aligned with the collective set of characteristics of successful change management identified in the literature. In particular:

- The focus has more often been on standalone initiatives (e.g., specific professional development programmes or national standards) than a prioritised set of aligned actions;
- Attempts to build key stakeholder understanding of, and support for, change programmes have tended to be episodic rather than ongoing;
- The approach to improvement has often involved either top-down implementation of specific programmes, or an expectation that schools will respond to high level system aspirations through their own efforts, rather than a balance of both;
- The self-managing schools ethos has worked against relationships and trust within and between different levels of the system, ameliorated to some extent by more recent efforts to build school networks.

Concluding comments

While Aotearoa New Zealand’s past approach to schooling system improvement has included some of the features of successful improvement programmes (e.g., professional development and more recently fostering stronger networking between schools), this has not always been done at the scale and in the sustained manner that is required to bring about enduring system-wide change. Further, greater focus on areas, such as the development of instructional and system leadership, engagement of parents/whānau in young people’s learning, and an appropriate balance between autonomy and accountability would have been desirable. Moving forward with an integrated set of measures to address these issues could bring greater progress in improving learning outcomes.

Doing so in a manner that is consistent with successful approaches to change management would also be important. Burns et al. (2016) say “Complex systems cannot be governed with simple, linear mechanisms. Instead, strategies must be developed that

take into account the dynamics and interdependencies of the system” (p. 18). Co-construction of the way forward involving all stakeholders, and ongoing review and adaptation as steps are taken, all the time with collective eyes on the ultimate improvement goals, will be important if schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand is to achieve significant system-wide improvement in learning outcomes in the future.

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Rob McIntosh is an Adjunct Research Fellow in the Faculty of Education, Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington. Since 2012, he has worked as a consultant, primarily in education, undertaking policy and review projects both within New Zealand and overseas. From 1996 to 2012, he was a senior leader in the Ministry of Education, holding a range of responsibilities over that time including for education system strategy development, the Ministry's research and data analysis functions, the leadership of policy advice across a range of schooling issues and tertiary and international education. Prior to that, he was an analyst and manager in the Treasury. He holds Masters Degrees from the University of Canterbury and the London School of Economics and Political Science.
<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7132-6430>