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Inspiring and Implementing Bottom-Up Change: The Omnivore's Advantage

[Commentary submission]

In this commentary, first I join with numerous educators who have argued for or produced evidence supporting bottom-up, professionally-driven educational change. However, I then argue that to fully realize the potential of this general change orientation, a significant and growing tendency toward parochialism within education must be surfaced and interrupted by bottom-up educational change agents. Specifically, I introduce two examples in support of the claim that powerful, well-developed change and improvement ideas—originated and refined in large part <u>outside the education sector</u>—nevertheless can be and have been adapted and applied by educators and their partners to noteworthy effects. My aim in this commentary is not to endorse a particular model or approach (though I do underline several viable options and point to supportive theory), but rather to strongly encourage bottom-up reformers to pragmatically adopt a form of <u>professional omnivorousness</u> so that their great base ideas can be operationalized to best effects.

System Flipping: Features, Virtues, Challenges

This section is substantially informed by ideas and findings contained within a notable book entitled <u>Flip the System: Changing Education from the Ground Up</u> (Evers & Kneyber, 2016). The book's editors, who are teachers from the Netherlands, sought to develop a bottom-up educational change framework—and in so doing they secured the contributions of a cadre of leading educational thinkers. They began by noting global education policies are leaning predictably in particular directions, especially to manage professionals (e.g., via tightened accountability and teacher evaluation policies) and to incorporate neoliberal-looking, choice-favoring, market-based reforms (Evers & Kneyber; also see Ravitch, 2011; Sahlburg, 2011).

Biesta (2013) and others have argued that a disturbing consequence of this transnational policy program has been further diminishment of teacher (and other educator) agency, perhaps even the very notion that they have meaningful expertise and input to contribute. There are many issues with this state of affairs, not the least of which are that teaching is reduced as a profession, teachers (acknowledged by nearly all as a topmost key to quality education) become disillusioned and demotivated, professional insights are missed, and education itself is narrowed and otherwise detrimentally altered.

An alternative approach would be to embrace a bottom-up form of educational change[1]. To do so with vigor first requires accepting that schools and school systems can and must seek to improve, but apart from that it flows from a distinct vision regarding how best to enable this improvement. Educators' and scholars' perspectives regarding precisely how to actualize bottom-up educational change may differ, but some common, inter-linking propositions can be gleaned. These include:

- Teachers and other educators possess much acquired knowledge and expertise (Winch, Oancea, & Orchard, 2014; Cain, 2015) which assumes various forms, including craft (and often tacit) knowledge, technical know-how, and professional judgement/wisdom.

- If this knowledge can be surfaced and brought into the collective, we can more frequently expect meaningful, context-sensitive educational improvement ideas and changes will be conceived and carried out (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hargreaves, Shirley, & Ng, 2012; Rosenholtz, 1989).

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[1] One also might persuasively argue, as Fullan has (1994), that effective educational reform should include both bottom-up and top-down elements. I do not disagree with this argument in principle but for this commentary have elected to focus exclusively on the bottom-up side, which has been particularly neglected. I take this position in part because, also like Fullan (2001; also see Bangs & Frost, 2016), I believe that for systems to develop successfully, the teaching profession must be the primary partner.

- Moreover, it is possible and desirable to organize and engineer educational environments to foster collaborative and collective professional efforts (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Harris & Jones, 2010). Too, it is possible and beneficial for formal leaders to encourage and enable expanded teacher leadership (e.g., Murphy, 2005; Louis et al., 2005; Sebastian, Huang, & Allensworth, 2017).

- Important determinants of teachers' (and humans', more generally) motivation include feeling supported, valued, and trusted (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Genuine, active participation and leadership in educational improvement activities is likely to have motivating effects.

- Likewise, school/system quality will more frequently increase if educators are positioned to be able to take ownership of the changes they wish to implement (see Ng, 2016).

- What <u>works</u> in one environment may not in another—or, related, may need to be significantly adjusted to fit the context (including resource availability/constraints, student and community population, professional strengths) (Honig, 2006). Local educators and partners are especially well positioned to sense and adjust to these nuances and, thus, to take leading roles in forging positive educational change.

I accept all of these points, as they accord both with my experiences as a longtime primary and secondary educator and educational leadership faculty member and with my internalization of the educational change literature. However, like others I recognize the considerable trials that await those who seek to bring about educational change (e.g., see recent <u>IJLE</u> commentary by Harris & Jones, 2017). But along with expanded freedom and power comes expanded responsibility, and educators working within bottom-up change approaches will invariably wish to find ways to support and systematize their efforts. A central challenge concerns "know-

how"— knowledge regarding how to move from initial conceptualization of the change idea or identified problem to solution, to implementation, to productive and sustainable change and improvement processes. Put another way, a key challenge for educators, schools, and school systems is to learn how "to get better at getting better" (from title for Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015). Here is where, in my view, the situation becomes complicated: Such knowledge is actually abundant, but much of it was developed and refined outside the field of education. A lurking problem, then, is whether and how a critical mass of understandably weary education professionals can nevertheless summon both the courage and the wisdom to orient outward with openness, allowing this external knowledge to complement theirs. If educators do so, I propose, their insightful and contextually-based change ideas will have substantially better odds of being effectively operationalized. In the next section, I further explore this notion, beginning by providing two illustrative examples of the advantages of seeking knowledge—and seeking respectful and productive relationships and partnerships—beyond the education profession itself.

System Flipping: Ideas from the Outside (Two Examples)

Here I offer two examples to illustrate the potential of ideas and processes, arising from outside and mingling with those from within education, to effectively assist bottom-up educational change agents. First, I point to recent and ongoing work by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and their educational partners, specifically their application of improvement science within Networked Improvement Communities in education (NICs; Bryk et al., 2015; LeMahieu, Bryk, Grunow, & Gomez, 2017). In brief, they are advocating for, and helping educators and partners to employ, a well-developed methodology to identify and solve practical problems and facilitate systematic improvements. It is beyond the scope of this

commentary to give it a deep treatment, as my main goal is more simply to note its origins. After long struggling with how to more consistently and ambitiously improve our schools, the Carnegie leaders and educational scholars described being ultimately inspired and changed by a meeting with Institution for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) past-President Donald Berwick, which led to a series of follow-up visits. They were also introduced to related literature, *The Best Practice* by Charles Kenney, which detailed how improvement science in health care itself borrowed from quality improvement processes earlier embraced within Japanese industry (Bryk et al., 2015; see also Nanaka & Takeuchi, 1995). These leaders subsequently became "serious students of IHI—how it organized its work and why and how it had come to do so as it did" (Bryk et al, p. xiii). More broadly, they described collectively reshaping their own professional identities:

> we have come to think of ourselves as a new breed of birds, the "analogical scavenger." We are constantly looking to other fields that share a concern about improving practices and that have made significant progress. We study these deeply, reflecting on commonalities with the education field, while also scrutinizing critical differences. Where do these ideas fit? Where are adaptations needed, and how do we discern which are most appropriate? (p. xiii).

Importantly, these authors not only accessed information from outside the field of education but also drew liberally from "some of the best ideas in education itself"—e.g., "communities of practice, teacher action research, lesson study, and the scholarship of teaching and learning" (p. xiii). In all cases, they have "scavenged for the best ideas and practices that have worked in other contexts but may not yet received their due attention in education" (p. xiii). The bottom line, for the purposes of this commentary, is that these leading scholars have been able to discover, adjust,

and adopt this powerful improvement methodology precisely because they were willing—indeed, were <u>compelled</u>—to think and look beyond the boundaries of education and educational specialists, to forge relationships across difference and borrow from the best ideas and processes, regardless of from where they had emerged. I view this as crucial role modeling for all educators interested in seriously engaging in improvement work.

Another illustrative example emerges from my ongoing research with <<name removed>> (Author, 2017a, <u>in press</u>), studying how high school educators and community members have partnered and shared ideas and leadership to restructure their programming and support college and career readiness reforms, namely to implement college/career academies. These leaders have accepted the reality that contemporary students' educations will invariably need to continue beyond high school and into at least some college or some other specialized training (see Author, 2017b). Accordingly, they are redesigning their high school programming to help students to select and progress within career pathways so they are more likely to smoothly/successfully transition upon their graduation. These changes, however, have brought considerable on-the-ground challenges and complexities. To do this work well requires creating opportunities for students to engage in authentic career exploration, experience integrated and relevant curricula, and ultimately to learn about what it takes to succeed in chosen domains. And to make such changes ultimately has required widely distributed leadership and the development of cross-sector partnerships, extending beyond district organizational boundaries to include community and business leaders who have routinely offered ideas and supports—including, for instance, invaluable input into how academic lessons could be refreshed and aligned to real-world needs. Although these disparate groups brought different perspectives, it still proved possible to attain and move with a shared moral purpose, one driven predominately by school,

system, and teacher leaders (also see Boylan, 2016, for a discussion on the centrality of shared moral purpose within teacher-led change). It would have been inconceivable, we believe, to actualize such major changes without forging partnerships with wise, committed partners and drawing upon their expertise. Principals and high school academy coaches were found to be pivotal in terms of establishing shared visions and shaping cultures and structures in which such relationships could develop and strengthen over time. Teacher leaders, as well, in many cases formed strong and supportive relationships with external partners.

Both of these examples demonstrate how effective school/system reforms can and have been implemented in large part because educators have willingly reached both within and beyond the world of education for ideas, for problem-solving methodologies, for partners. Only in so doing have educators and partners in both cases been able to operationalize and carry out their great school/system improvement ideas. Key here is to note the large payoffs—for students, for schools, for educational systems—of moving beyond organizational boundaries and of looking both outward and inward for potential solutions to locally-identified priority areas.

Stepping back, considerable research reinforces the general wisdom of practicing, and of leading change, in an open and inclusive manner: As Akkerman and Bakker (2011) summarize, theory and research support that the potential for learning is particularly high at/across boundaries. Learning is viewed as a process involving multiple perspectives, arising out of dialogue and negotiations of meaning. Related, scientific research converges to support the notion that diversity (conceived broadly—cultural, racial, intellectual, etc.) makes us collectively smarter, more creative, more innovative (Phillips, 2014). Although it may also introduce discomfort at times, we can consider it as

the pain of exercise. You have to push yourself to grow your muscles. The pain, as the old saw goes, produces the gain. In just the same way, we need diversity—in teams, organizations and society as a whole—if we are to change, grow and innovate. (Phillips, n.p.)

For purposes of this commentary, I intentionally stop short of endorsing a particular methodology for seeking bottom-up change, instead seeking more modestly to argue that an open, inward- and outward-looking, disposition/orientation is optimum for bottom-up educational change agents (in the next section, I explore what can stand in the way). However, readers are advised that several specific and comprehensive methodologies/approaches are available and, if adopted along with the dispositions I am encouraging, would have a high probability of success in bottom-up educational change contexts. For example, research-practice partnerships (RPPs) are based on the premise that structured exchanges between researchers and practitioners can mutually benefit members of both parties (and the students who are served). According to Coburn, Penuel, and Geil (2013), such partnerships can take three basic types: design research partnerships, research alliances, and the previously described networked improvement communities. Though studies of RPPs in education are in their early stages, existing evidence supports their efficacy under certain conditions (Coburn & Penuel, 2016).

In this vein, Farrell and Coburn (2017) proposed a framework for understanding when/how partnerships are most likely to foster school system-level learning and change. They drew from the notion that organizations (school districts) differ relative to their absorptive capacity, defined as "the ability to recognize the value of new information, assimilate it, and apply it in novel ways as part of organizational routines, policies, and practices" (p. 136). A driving idea is that external partners often possess expertise, tools, resources that can assist

educators, but that a variety of structural and cultural barriers can complicate these partnership efforts. Tying back to my overarching point, among requirements for successful RPPs is that there must be leaders who are willing and able to bridge across different cultures, norms, and structures (Mintrop, 2016; Coburn & Penuel, 2016) so that different partners' expertise can be collectively brought to bear. Farrell and Coburn also drew from Volberda, Foss, and Lyles (2010), emphasizing the importance of strategic knowledge leadership at the system level, which entails:

- Identification/assessment of current knowledge sources within the organization

- Search within the broader field for available knowledge sources

- Synthesis of knowledge acquired – e.g., by linking this external knowledge with internal knowledge and organizational routines.

Such leadership, I propose, would be equally important within smaller units (e.g., a school or a smaller professional learning community) and within bottom-up change contexts. A key initial aspect relates to such leaders' stance toward current and prospective partners: As Farrell and Coburn (2017, p. 143) reasoned, "leaders may vary in their willingness to engage with external partners in the first place depending on how much they value the insight or support of outside partners, making this a crucial component of strategic knowledge leadership." In any case, readers are advised to further explore RPPs and/or other well-developed models (e.g., disciplined forms of action research and research-engaged professional learning communities: Stenhouse, 1975; Dimmock, 2016) while also noting that specific conditions and dispositions will be among the keys to their success.

We can also reflect upon John Dewey's concept of a lab school: Educators in such schools, present now across the globe, are relatively more free to innovate in a bottom-up

fashion, but wisely coupled with that is systematic, empirical experimentation (see Arar &

Massry-Herzalah, 2017). By coupling freedom to innovate with experimentation, these schools

are assumed to be better equipped to identify and improve upon promising innovations, while

modifying or discarding less successful ones. This approach, too, is well supported. I further

suggest, within these schools too, it would be advantageous for students were educators to adopt

an open stance toward innovations and partnerships arising from within and beyond education.

Finally, boundary spanning leadership and partnerships of the sorts I am envisioning are

admittedly complex and challenging, likely requiring educational leaders to engage in practices

in which they have not been deeply trained. For those who wish to become more prepared to

engage in leadership under such circumstances, I point to the public management literature:

Crosby and Bryson (2010) have developed a framework for integrative leadership, defined as

"bringing together diverse groups and organizations together in semi-permanent ways, and

typically across sector boundaries, to remedy complex public problems and achieve the common

good" (p. 211). Their framework includes five interactive leadership elements that affect cross-

sector collaborations' functioning. Related, Bryson, Crosby, and Stone (2006, 2015) have

developed and adjusted a comprehensive framework for understanding and engaging in cross-

sector collaboration. Kania and Kramer (2011) also wrote persuasively about the nature and

power of related collective impact work, while Henig, Riehl, Houston, Rebell, and Wolff (2016)

have completed a nationwide scan of cross-sector collaborations in U.S. education. Both works

are likely to provide bottom-up change agents with useful material.

Choices: Parochialism Versus Pragmatic Social Exploration

Notwithstanding all that has thus far been presented, developing the disposition to

routinely explore beyond disciplinary and social boundaries may be even more challenging than

it sounds, for several reasons. Fundamentally, educational professionals must confront the question of whether doing so is worth the effort or risk. In this regard, there are both general and education-specific points to consider. Generally, stepping beyond system boundaries requires making oneself vulnerable, learning new concepts and jargon, and developing new relationships, and these will be felt by some as challenging work (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Moreover, it requires the humble admission that participants individually and collectively do not possess all the answers, coupled with the belief that some helpful ideas and approaches can be found in the broader world, beyond ourselves, beyond our professional domains.

In education, where many educators have experienced diminished voice, agency, and autonomy—and, more broadly, a sense of low and diminishing social status and trust—it may be particularly challenging to assume such an orientation, to look outward with trust and optimism. More specifically, educators may be concerned about status asymmetries and about whether their educational knowledge and expertise will be valued or sidelined. A natural reaction may be to close off to the outside world, to adopt stances like "What do they know? They have not taught!" and the like.

Indeed, trust repeatedly sprung up as a theme in Evers and Kneyber's (2016) edited collection; it was rightfully noted that the current policy regime is in many ways has reflected distrust in educators and/or of government more generally, and such policies often then lead to further distrust (extending both ways; Evers & Kneyber). Yet, in such spaces in which bottom-up change approaches are possible, trust must have been placed in the wisdom, expertise, and professionalism of educators. This trust offering should not be taken lightly, and educators operating under such conditions should then seek to act in such a way as to build upon it. One way to do so, as Evers and Kneyber (2016, p. 282) propose, is to create spaces in which

"teachers, students, the state, teacher educators, politicians, and so on actually meet." To this I would add, within such spaces, educators (and partners) should assume orientations that show openness to and respect for the unique knowledge that each member can bring to bear—and especially, they should take care not to stereotype members of certain groups (e.g., business community members), assuming from the get-go that their values and change ideas are irreconcilably different, etc.

However, I share others' concerns regarding increasing ideological fervor and insularity cutting across much education-related advocacy, research, and discourse. Seeking to understand rapid, transnational changes to education policy, some educational scholars have credibly asserted that the field has been systematically and detrimentally affected by neoliberal actors, networks, and policies (e.g., see Ball, 2012; Sahlberg, 2006). In a recent Education Policy Analysis Archives school choice special issue commentary, Lubienski (2017), while not seeking invalidate that broad argument, expressed several social/cultural and operational concerns that I also share. He observed that the special issue authors, while producing important knowledge, were inadvertently showing signs of communicating within a "linguistic echo chamber" (p. x)— shown through such practices as "citing like-minded scholars, publishing for what are likely sympathetic audiences, and failing to engage a diversity of perspective, or other forms of evidence" (p. 8). As one example, Lubienski noted he has yet to have met anyone who describes him/herself as a "neoliberal" and implies scholars' frequent use of this term is estranging (p. 9).

Related, Fusarelli (2017, July 31) lamented the ubiquity of educational silos: "I see these silos everywhere," including "in discussions over how to improve schooling in the US" (n.p.). He provided several examples, including noting how school choice advocates' and critics' virulent rhetoric sometimes flies in the face of "objective reality" (n.p.). In the end, he concludes

The challenge is that in our highly politicized climate, the complexity and nuances of

reformers' positions on these important issues get obscured and hidden within their silos.

This leads to inflated, contentious rhetoric and simplistic, weak policy reforms. Without

breaking down those silos and barriers and finding some common ground, it will be

difficult to move beyond the "either/or" rhetoric to achieve meaningful reform in

education (n.p.)

Running through both commentaries is a concern about unproductive silos, echo chambers, about

demonizing opponents while romanticizing ourselves and our causes, a broad problem in today's

world (see also Cairney, 2014; Sabatier, Hunter, & McLaughlin, 1987), and one that may be

particularly acute in and around education. Related to education, these concerns are actually not

new. In 1996, Michael Apple cautioned: "at times, some critical educators have been so critical

that we too often assume—consciously or unconsciously—that everything that exists within the

education system bears only the marks of domination" (Apple, p. xvii). Such assumptions are

overly simplistic and ahistorical, he argued—ultimately "disabling" for those wishing to continue

the complex struggle to build a more progressive, democratic education system. In any case,

many in and around education—understandably, although at a cost—appear to have identified

and camped within in-groups and out-groups, partially inoculated from threats to their own

deeply-held views while having a safe haven within which to discredit or distort those held by

others.

This troubling situation, I believe, pervades beyond the big picture of those operating in

the policy and scholarly worlds and threatens to hamstring educators and other advocates of

bottom-up educational change, who would stand to benefit greatly from an open-minded stance

and willingness to consider the ideas of diverse individuals and groups. Failing to do so, I

believe, is to squander a huge opportunity. At least some leaders—teachers, administrators, scholars, community partners—must take this step and, in doing so, dramatically boost their decisional and operational capacity as they identify and pursue meaningful local changes.

In Conclusion: Recommending Ideational and Operational Omnivorousness

I conclude, then, by reiterating my endorsement of bottom-up educational improvement approaches, but only under a particular condition—in which the change agents have adopted a pragmatic, open, and outward-looking approach, which I term "professional omnivorousness." We can, I propose, take a cue from the aforementioned Carnegie leaders as well as the high school educators and their cross-sector partners who have ambitiously re-designed their programming. We can also be inspired by the accumulating research showing the benefits of social exploration (Pentland, 2013), of diversity (of people, ideas, experiences, areas of expertise; Phillips, 2014), of crossing boundaries (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). In adopting such an orientation, paradoxically I suspect educators will find—as I have—that doing so is fundamentally empowering and will ultimately act to build and restore trust between educators and potential partners. Most importantly, what it does is open us up to a vast store of knowledge that can be, and has been, adapted and applied to education to great effect.

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