

CAN WE MOVE FROM THE SELF-MANAGING SCHOOL TO THE SELF-TRANSFORMING SCHOOL?

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The purpose of this workshop is to explore the possibility of moving from the self-managing school to the self-transforming school. This does not mean that schools will operate alone; most will be members of networks, and these networks will be global more than they are local. Most will be part of a system of schools and will draw on 'the system' for support in some matters. Transformation under these conditions will occur only if a school has the capacity and determination to achieve it – no amount of externally designed re-structuring, re-staffing, or command-and-control direction will be sufficient. Dramatically different approaches will be required; leadership and governance to reproduce the status quo or to achieve modest improvement will not suffice. The case for change can be made in many mostly Western countries including Australia, England, New Zealand and the United States.

A self-managing school is one to which there has been decentralised a significant amount of authority and responsibility to make decisions on the allocation of resources within a centrally determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum, standards and accountabilities. Resources are defined broadly to include staff, services and infrastructure, each of which will typically entail the allocation of funds to reflect local priorities. A self-managing school has a high level of but not complete autonomy, given the centrally-determined framework. There is a strong body of evidence that a balance of autonomy, accountability and choice contributes to high levels of achievement providing schools have the capacity to be self-managing.

Whereas a capacity for self-management has been chiefly concerned with process, self-transformation is intended to shift the focus to outcomes (Caldwell & Spinks, 2013, forthcoming). Transformation is considered to be significant, systematic and sustained change that secures success for all students in all settings.

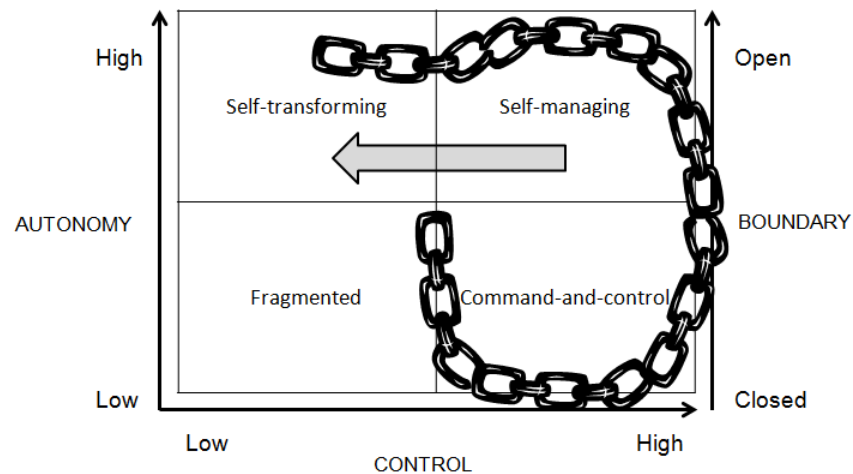
On current evidence, a capacity for self-management is powerfully constrained by centrally determined frameworks that can best be described as command-and-control or carrot-and-stick wherein governments at all levels are designing and implementing a myriad of short-term projects, each with one-best-way approaches and tight accountabilities. These may lead to short-term improvements at best, or flat-lining or regression at worst, rather than the transformation that is required to lift performance and secure a place for the nation among the best-performing in the world. Regrettably, current interest in school improvement is characterised by exhortations to do better what has been attempted without large-scale success rather than unchaining schools and providing uplifting encouragement and support to respond to the challenge of transformation.

The lessons from England are instructive given that Australia, in particular, seems to be following the same path in its commitment to a command-and-control approach. Seddon's critique of public sector reform in England is instructive:

- The public-sector reform that is most needed is the one that is never talked about – that of the regime itself, the vast pyramid, hundreds of thousands strong, of people engaged in regulating, specifying, inspecting, instructing and coercing others doing the work to comply with their edicts. (Seddon, 2010a)
- The reality that standardisation drives costs up will be resisted, rationalised and angrily denied. But studying the work obliges managers to confront the evidence of their own eyes: while specialisation and standardisation of work lower transaction costs, overall costs of service go up because the factory design creates more handovers, fragmentation, duplication and errors and hence re-work, and generates massive failure demand. Studying the work, they understand a paradox: managing costs creates costs (Seddon, 2010b).

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Seddon (2010b) argues that there are greater efficiencies, as well as better outcomes, if the focus is on local services: 'Local services are human, receptive, engaging and productive. Counter intuitively, they are also high quality and low cost. So if the idea of local services goes against the grain – as it does – it is the grain we have to change'. He suggests that 'economy comes from flow, not scale'.



Here are five features that may characterise the self-transforming school:

1. The self-transforming school calls for higher levels of autonomy to the extent that the school is unchained from the constraints of a command-and-control and carrot-and-stick approach.
2. The self-transforming school is unchained to choose the support it needs from sources of its choice even though system support may be on offer. The culture of 'the system' should shift to service.
3. The self-transforming school is unchained from the constraints of local networks, which, in many cases, are simply administrative units in a command-and-control, hierarchical approach to line management, although it may include such networks in the many constantly changing networking arrangements in which it engages to share knowledge, address problems of common concern and pool resources.
4. The self-transforming school is unchained from the need to wait for and adopt so-called best-practice innovations that are scaled-up for implementation in all schools. What is scaled-up is a capacity for innovation and freedom to choose the innovations that best suit local circumstance.
5. The self-transforming school is unchained from the myriad of often unsustainable short-term conditional grants, each of which calls for lengthy submissions and centrally-managed accountability, with its seemingly endless paperwork, to an approach canvassed in the Gonski Report (Recommendation 24) in which needs-based recurrent funding is rolled in to allocations to schools.

References

- Caldwell, B.J. & Spinks, J.M. (2013) (forthcoming). *The Self-Transforming School*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Seddon, J. (2010a). *Systems Thinking in the Public Sector*. Axminster, UK: Triarchy Press.
- Seddon, J. (2010b). 'The economics of localism'. (Available at www.systemsthinking.co.uk)