

Bringing effective instructional practice to scale: An introduction

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It's been two decades since the publication of Richard Elmore's (1996) "Getting to Scale with Good Educational Practice". In this article, Elmore argued that substantially transforming instructional practice at scale and sustainably had proven to be an elusive challenge. He pointed out that even in cases where new ideas had sought to radically transform teaching and learning in schools, the instructional core, understood as the relationship between teacher and student in the presence of knowledge, had changed very little, that noticeable changes tended to occur in a relatively small number of schools and classrooms, and that they didn't last very long in the few places where they were adopted. Twenty years later, the challenge of bringing effective instructional practice to scale remains a pressing and elusive challenge for education systems around the world. The urgency of the challenge gets heightened when one considers that school systems around the world, even the high performers, are far from effectively preparing our younger generations to thrive in and productively contribute to improve a rapidly changing and unpredictable world.

The past few decades have seen the emergence of varied initiatives and strategies in diverse contexts that have successfully managed to improve, transform, or reinvent instructional practice in large numbers of schools across entire public education systems, with demonstrated improvements in student learning. While necessarily imperfect, these examples provide a rich source of practical and empirical knowledge about the strategies and conditions under which effective instructional practice may be successfully brought to scale.

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Overview of the special issue

This special issue brings together original articles by reform leaders and scholars who have developed and/or studied relatively successful approaches to large scale instructional change in a diversity of contexts: Escuela Nueva in Colombia, the Learning Community Project in Mexico, the Gauteng Language and Mathematics Strategy in South Africa, Pratham's Literacy Strategy in India, the Ontario Literacy Strategy in Canada, and Long Beach Unified School District's system-wide instructional strategy in California, United States. Following the six cases are commentary papers by Richard Elmore and Michael Fullan. The two concluding essays pull together common and divergent threads across the six cases, derive key lessons, and articulate critical perspectives for the future of improvement in the education sector. While Elmore raises fundamental questions about the very project of policy-driven improvement, Fullan argues that, though elusive, whole system improvement centered around deep learning is doable.

A mosaic of contexts, theories of action, and strategies

As can easily become evident from simply looking at this list, the collection of cases presented here significantly broadens the scope of countries and contexts conventionally studied in by educational change scholars. While it includes two well-known North American systems, the majority of the cases presented here highlight successful but so far not so widely known large-scale instructional change initiatives in the Global South. As Charles Leadbeater (2010) has pointed out, some of the most powerful educational innovations are arising in emerging rather than in developed economies, where the needs are greatest and conventional solutions are expensive and ineffective. At a time when conventional schooling, even in high performing systems, is falling short of adequately preparing children and youth for the future, we believe that the cases from the Global South presented in this special issue offer important clues for the educational change field moving forward.

In addition to the broad scope of countries represented in this special issue, the six approaches to large scale instructional change presented here represent a wide range of contexts, theories of action, strategies, and locus of development. Yet they share in common a relative degree of success in improving or transforming the instructional core across hundreds or thousands of schools, with demonstrated positive impact on student learning.

Each author brings their personal style, preferences in structure and tone, and choices about which features of the large scale instructional change in question to highlight most. At the same time, we deliberately asked each author to address seven key points:

1. Relevant contextual information about the country/region where the reform under consideration was launched.
2. A description of the observable instructional practice(s) or principles advanced through the reform initiative.

3. An account of how participating teachers learn the new/improved instructional practice advanced through the reform initiative.
4. A description of the strategies and conditions that enabled the scaling of effective instructional practice and an explanation of why the initiative worked the way it did.
5. Scale reached and evidence of impact on student learning/outcomes.
6. Key remaining challenges and setbacks associated to instructional change, large-scale roll-out and sustainability.
7. A discussion of how the case in question contributes to the advancement of knowledge on large-scale/system-wide instructional improvement.

In many ways, the editors of this special issue stand on opposite ends of the spectra within which the large-scale instructional change initiatives presented here fall. Indeed, throughout the development of this special issue, we took part in heated and in many cases still unresolved debates about the direction and strategies that educational systems should take moving forward. One of us values the hierarchical nature of conventional instructional practice and educational policy. The other prefers to subvert these and turn them into horizontal relationships of dialogue and mutual learning. One of us endorses the view that in emerging economies with weak educational systems the best first step is to secure basic acceptable instructional practice through highly prescriptive procedures controlled by the central office. The other believes that radical instructional innovation and collective teacher autonomy is a moral imperative and should be the point of departure to educational change initiatives in the Global South. One believes that educational systems in the Global South should aspire to emulate high performing districts from developed economies. The other sees in the institutional frailty of education systems in the Global South an opportunity to radically depart from conventional schooling and invent the public education systems of the future. One sees the problem of changing the instructional core as an essentially technical matter. The other sees it as fundamentally cultural and political. Each of the cases presented here fall somewhere within these spectra, sometimes closer to one end, sometimes closer to the other. Through our constant conversations and debate we, the editors, have enriched and refined our own thinking and forged a strong friendship. You, the reader, will likely find some strategies and approaches more attractive than others. But our hope and invitation to you is to let the rich mosaic of narratives presented here to expand and deepen how you think and/or go about changing instructional practice at scale.

Before concluding this introduction, let us offer a few working definitions and theoretical foundations underpinning the theme discussed here, starting with the two concepts that weave together this special issue: *effective instructional practice* and *scale*.

Theoretical foundations

Instructional practice is broadly defined here as the set of interactions that occur at the level of the instructional core, that is, the relationship between a teacher and a learner in the presence of knowledge (City et al. 2009; Cohen et al. 2003). *Effective*

is used here to qualify those instructional practices and the underlying principles, that enhance or deepen student learning. The term is considered to be context-specific and relative to the point of departure of the system where changes in instructional practice are fostered, as well as to the theories of action underlying specific instructional change initiatives. In some cases, it may involve improving existing practices, whereas in others it may require substantially transforming the dynamics within the instructional core. In South Africa and India, where children are barely learning to read and write in schools, the Gauteng Language and Mathematics Strategy and Read India have introduced basic conventional literacy instruction to substantially improve student learning. In Mexico and Colombia, the Learning Community Project and Escuela Nueva endeavored to transform teaching and learning in rural schools, radically departing from conventional instructional practice, with demonstrated improvements in student learning. In Ontario and in successful school districts in the US, where conventional instruction is consolidated, making instructional practice effective may involve a combination of improvement and innovation. As a final remark, with the expression *effective instructional practice* we make reference not only to its outcomes (improved or deeper student learning) but also, and more importantly, to the actual process that takes place when teachers and students interact in the presence of content.

Coburn (2003) proposed a definition of *scale* that shifted from simple replication in a large number of sites or by a large number of actors to a concept composed of four interrelated dimensions: (1) *Spread*, that is, the expansion of reform practices to new sites or groups; (2) *Depth*, or the extent to which practice is transformed in meaningful and deep ways; (3) *Sustainability*, understood as the creation and adaptation of policy and infrastructure systems to support the consolidation and expansion of deep improvements in practice over time; and (4) *Ownership*, or the transfer of knowledge and authority to sustain the reform to the actors at the ground level. For the purposes of this special issue, we adopt this re-conceptualization of scale.

The six cases in this special issue seek to contribute to the theoretical and practical integration of the micro-dynamics of pedagogical change and the macro-dynamics of large-scale reform. Empirically-based theoretical developments on the link between classroom practice and education policy have re-conceptualized education reform as an iterative, non-sequential and complex process that requires the support from and mutual interaction between multiple actors and contexts (Coburn 2004; Datnow and Park 2009). The special issue builds on this theoretical understanding with a specific focus on effective instructional practice and the strategies and conditions under which it can be brought to scale.

Looking ahead

Twenty years ago, Elmore (1996) pointed out the need to develop practical theory to understand how people learn to do things differently and how institutions can enable such learning as a prerequisite to successfully tackle the problem of bringing good pedagogy to scale. Twenty years later, the question of whether educational systems

will be up to the task of enabling and spreading at scale the kind of deep learning that humans are inherently capable of and that will be required for the future of humanity and the planet remains unanswered. In their commentary papers, Elmore and Fullan offer two easily distinguishable takes on this question. While Elmore sees the future prospects of education systems with well-founded pessimism (educational systems operate under a logic that prevents, rather than enables, learning), Fullan presents a more optimistic picture (substantially changing pedagogy to deepen learning in entire education systems, while elusive, is doable). In our view, the way forward is best captured by Antonio Gramsci's (1971) call to act with the pessimism of reason and the optimism of will. It is our hope that this special issue will contribute to our understanding of what may come next in the quest to make powerful learning the legacy of future education systems.

Given the tensions and substantive disagreements surfaced in both the articles and the concluding essays, this special issue sharpens the debates for the next generation of scholars working on problems of educational change. It is our hope that these debates, informed by research, will challenge and advance our understanding of the very possibility of going to scale with instructional improvement.

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