Getting to Great, for All

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Abstract

As we live through this age of disruption in the economy with its impact on education, we have the knowledge and skills to employ a process that creates schools that are great for all students. The new economy is going to demand a population that is literate, numerate, and has the social-emotional competencies to work well with others while managing personal, social, and employment successes and challenges. This essay will articulate a theory of how using a developmental systems theory approach to school quality will support the creation of schools that engage in the type of continual improvement processes that will allow them to become and stay great at effectively teaching all learners. This essay will integrate ecological perspectives on human development, systems thinking, and improvement science to propose a roadmap for creating and sustaining great schools that are designed to serve all children. This essay will make the argument that failure in education is systematically organized and reflects actions taken to preserve and perpetuate deeply held societal beliefs. It will use that argument to suggest that there are other deeply held societal beliefs that, if used to systematically organize education, would lead to significantly improved results.

Keywords: *Effective schools, ecological perspectives, systems thinking, improvement science;*

Let's start with an understanding that we know what makes a great school, and that there are lots of great schools in wealthy, poor, urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods. We have great schools that are serving homogenous groups and we have great schools that are serving heterogeneous groups. An emerging body of research suggests that great, defined as highly effective, schools share some common characteristics regardless of context (Dobie, Will, & Fryer, 2013; Sammons, Hillman, & Mortimore, 1995

After four years of identifying highly effective schools, Edvestors (Rennie Center for Educational Research and Policy, 2010) identified three common characteristics of these schools as: a) shared leadership – shared learning: distributed leadership grounded in shared accountability between administrators and teachers toward a goal of instructional excellence and increased student achievement; b) data-driven instruction: intentional systems to use data to drive decisions about curriculum, instruction and student supports; and, c) academic rigor and student support: a student-centered approach that balances high academic expectations with integrated academic and developmental supports targeted to student needs. Five years later, Edvestors and the Rennie Center (Rennie Center for Educational Research and Policy, 2015) looked at those effective schools which were able to sustain improvement over time. They found that those schools which sustain a high level of performance demonstrated: a) strong leadership and shared ownership; b) meaningful teacher collaboration; c) effective use of data; d) academic rigor and student support; and, e) effective family and community partnerships. What these findings hold in common is that highly effective schools are ones in which the adult community (principal, teachers, and parents) are working together to meet the cognitive and developmental needs of the children in their care.

The position being advocated in this essay is that taking highly effective schools to scale demands a systems approach to school improvement. High-quality schools that are excellent over time are a function of the system in which they reside. This does not mean you cannot have excellent schools within a mediocre system. It does mean that the sustained success of that school is at risk or that it must operate outside the system.

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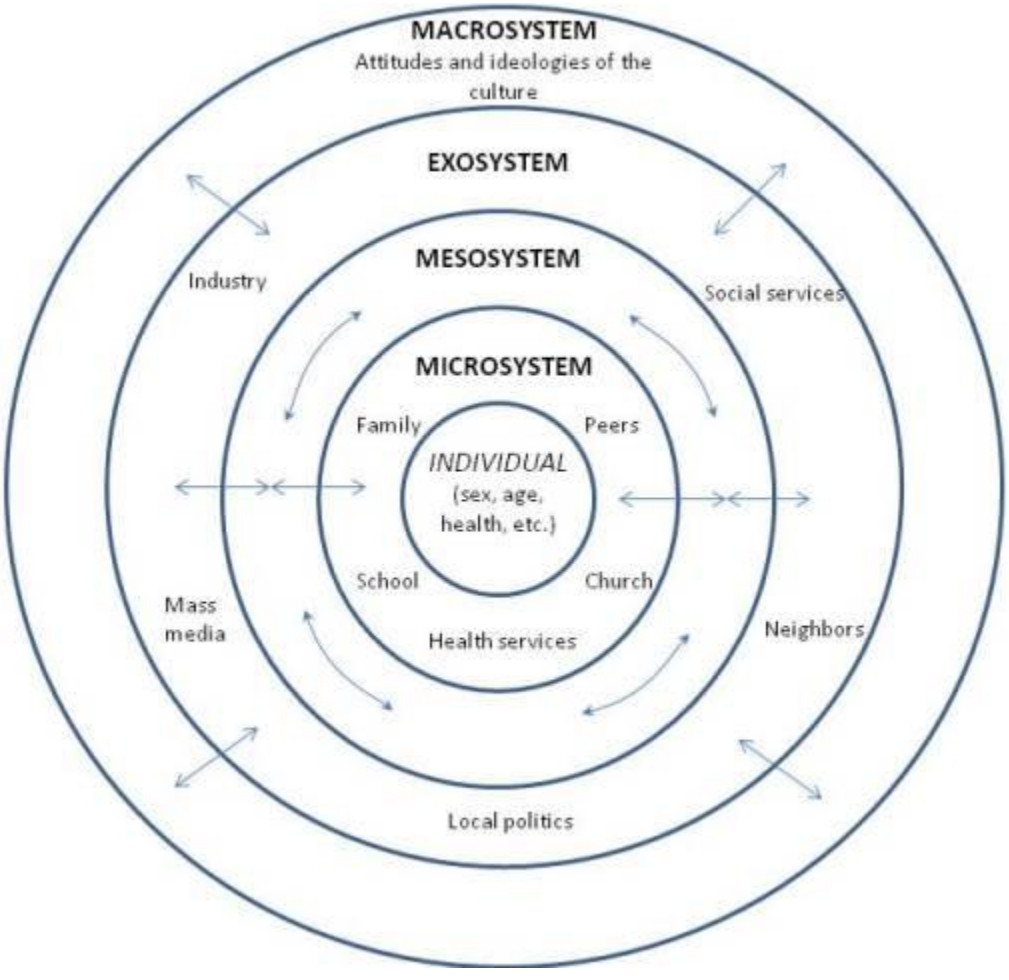
A compelling systems model that is useful to understand the challenges to creating sustainable excellence in schools and systems of schools was articulated by. One reason that this model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is that it helps us recognize that great schools are not created by a single teacher doing good things in a particular classroom, e.g., the image of Socrates or Confucius that drives too much of our decision-making, but that great schools are an aggregate of great classrooms as they systematically prepare students to meet the demands of their social context. Sustainable excellence will demand changes in the system and will create changes in the system. The dynamism within Bronfenbrenner's model is part of its utility.

Bronfenbrenner points out that we become adults in a complex and interconnected system. He argues that this relationship is not a linear one, even though we need to understand how linear relationships work within the system. For example, there is evidence that the number of different words spoken to a child on a daily basis prior to entering school has a positive impact on his or her acquisition of vocabulary which has a positive impact on his or her school performance. There is evidence that a homeless child exhibits similar characteristics to a child who has attention deficit disorder with the corresponding negative impact on his or her school performance. A classroom that is predominately composed of the former student will most likely learn more in a shorter period of time than a classroom that is filled with the latter student. The child, however, should not be held accountable, or overly credited, for those conditions. Those conditions are often a function of family wealth and background. It is how the child interacts with those conditions that impact his or her learning outcomes; likewise the manner in which the school in which the child is enrolled responds to the outcomes of his or her experience will impact his or her, and the school's, performance.

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner (1979) Model for the Ecology of Human Development (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecological_systems_theory)



As the figure above indicates, we all exist within a complex set of interacting contexts to which we bring our social-biological being. Bronfenbrenner labelled the immediate social context in which we interact the microsystem. It is composed of our family, our schools, our churches, our health services, our immediate economy, and our personal community. These social interactions are the trigger for the child's meaning-making process. These are the social interactions through which, with experimentation, he or she learns about the world and his or her place within it. We know that the more stable is this context and the more it is organized to support that child's growth and development, the more effective he or she will become in the world. The microsystem can, therefore, both facilitate and constrain a child's development.

The microsystem exists within the context of the mesosystem. Bronfenbrenner points out that the child may have direct interactions with various elements within his or her microsystem (e.g., family or school) which have interactions independent of the child that will also influence the child. For example, the family may interact with the school, or the local housing authority, or other local institutions in a manner that influences the child. In Boston, we have a system of school choice that has a direct impact on the schools to which a child has access. That is an example of a policy within a child's exosystem that has an impact on his or her well-being prior to the child's direct (microsystemic) interaction with the school. Quality of housing, employment, and medical services are other examples of exosystem factors which have an impact on the quality of the child's microsystemic experience. These impacts are non-linear yet significant. In the United States for example, the zip code (exosystem) in which a child lives predicts his or her college examination scores. As we discuss school improvement, we think a lot about how to change the child's microsystem, e.g., the teacher or school, when it may well be factors in the exosystem, e.g., financial assets of the community, where change needs to occur.

The mesosystem exists within the context of the macrosystem. This has been referred to as the cultural beliefs and attitudes that influence the institutional structures of the exosystem. Hayek (1944) in his support of the free market economy makes the argument that a centralized economy will create a different type of person than will a free market economy. It will create different institutions in the exosystem, which will reward and model different behaviors within the microsystem, which will, in turn, differentially influence the development of a child born within that particular system. Children born in different microsystems with have different inspirations and aspirations.

Based on Bronfenbrenner's model, we can suggest that the outcomes we see for different children, particularly in the United States, is a function of the beliefs we hold about those children within our socio-cultural context.
A developmental systems approach to school improvement is one that is focused on making changes throughout the system and does not rely on only changing one part of the system with the theory that such a change will drive improvement throughout the system. Instead, it demands a focus on change throughout the macrosystem. A systems approach to change demands an active collaboration between adults in many sectors who share the goal of creating sustainable great schools for all children, regardless of background. It is this need for collaboration across diverse groups that is the biggest obstacle to change. The challenge is how to create the conditions through which these changes can occur. The core contention in this essay is that we need to address these conditions as a function of the area of the macrosystem at which we are making the interventions.

At the macrosystem level, we must start with being vigilant about considering the societal ideas which are used to govern policy decisions that affect the structure of schooling in our communities. A particularly important shift in thinking is to see individual outcomes as a function of the system and not of the individual.

In terms of improving school performance, the most important area of interventions is in the mesosystem. As discussed earlier, the mesosystem is comprised of the various institutions (e.g., family, housing, economy, church, or civil organizations such as transportation and law enforcement) that interact in ways that deeply impact the child's microsystem. Building collaborative networks of adults across a mesosystem who are focused on school quality and improvement is a critical element in creating and

sustaining highly effective schools In communities where the academic outcomes are not reaching high standards, the common perspective is that the economic and demographic composition of the student body inhibits success. Currently, we respond to these challenges by making microsystemic changes such as the creation of magnet schools, exam schools, or charter schools to increase access to a high quality learning experience for some of the students in that context. What does not happen is the creation of a mesosystem response where the relevant institutions truly collaborate to develop, resource, implement and monitor a multi-tier and multi-year plan of action to drive improvement across the system. What is lacking is an acceptance of the power of the system to make collaborative change and a methodology for facilitating the change.

The other question that I think is central to the practice of education is how do we create adult collaboratives that are focused on providing a high-quality learning experience for all children within their microsystem? How do we implement a systematic process that will allow us to design, implement, continually improve, and take to scale high-quality learning experiences? .

Implicit in this recommendation to apply improvement science approaches to school improvement strategies within the framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems perspective is a statement about the euro-centric values of individual uniqueness and autonomy, particularly as they stand as obstacles to the development of powerful communities of care that include our most exceptional and most vulnerable children. It is the over-valuing of individualism and autonomy that inhibit the acceptance and implementation of a systems approach to the growth and development of great schools that are accessible to all. Efforts to build adult collaboratives that are focused on system change are often disrupted by the threat to individual control, the fear that one's authority will be weakened or,that one's insights into how the intervention should work will not be appreciated or will not get the credit they deserve. The acceptance is inhibited by how much the new work will demand that the individual, and the group they represent, may have to change and grow to be an effective collaborator in the change process.

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