

## **Sustainable Leadership and Development in Education: creating the future, conserving the past**

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### **Introduction**

At the beginning of 2007, the International Panel on Climate Change declared that we had less than a decade to limit and avoid the most destructive effects of economically self-interested activity that is creating massive global climate change. And a report by UNICEF (2007) of children's wellbeing in 22 countries ranked two of the world's wealthiest economies — the UK and the US — at the very bottom of the league table of all industrial nations covered by its survey. In their single-minded, headlong pursuit of economic competitiveness and development at any price, one-dimensional knowledge economies are destroying the planet and eating their young

Currently, fashionable educational change and reform strategies similarly threaten to treat our teachers and human resources as expendable waste, just as multinational businesses and politicians have undermined the sustainability of our natural resources. Imposed short-term targets, endless testing and quick political wins at the cost of deep learning for all students are the enemy of educational sustainability.

In recent years, I have written two — some might think apparently contradictory — books on educational leadership and change. *Teaching In The Knowledge Society* argues that schools, teaching and learning need to be reconfigured to prepare all young people to participate in transforming their countries into creative knowledge economies and to have opportunities to be employed at the highest levels of these economies, in high skill — high wage societies (Hargreaves, 2003).

More and more nations are or aspire to be *knowledge societies*. The knowledge economy is not just a synonym for information society. In an age of electronic, digital and satellite technologies, knowledge societies address how information and ideas are created, used, circulated and adapted at an accelerating speed in 'knowledge-based communities', i.e. networks of individuals striving to produce and circulate new knowledge. In knowledge societies, wealth, prosperity and economic development depend on people's capacity to out-invent and outwit their competitors, to tune in to the desires and demands of the consumer market, and to change jobs or develop new skills as economic fluctuations and downturns require. In knowledge societies, these capacities are not just the property of individuals, but also of organisations which have the capacity to share, create and apply new knowledge continuously over time in cultures of mutual learning and continuous innovation. Knowledge society organisations develop these capacities by providing their members with extensive opportunities for lifelong upskilling and retraining; by breaking down barriers to learning and communication and getting

people to work in overlapping, heterogeneous and flexible teams; by looking at problems and mistakes as opportunities for learning more than as occasions for blame; by involving everyone in the ‘big picture’ of where the organisation is going; and by developing the ‘social capital’ of networks and relationships that provide people with extra support and further learning. The knowledge society is a learning society. Economic success and a culture of continuous innovation depend on the capacity of workers to keep learning themselves and from each other throughout their working lives.

Schools that educate young people for the knowledge economy have to break with many aspects of the past. The agrarian and industrial models of one teacher-one class schooling need to replace standardised instruction that emphasises only the basics of literacy and numeracy with a broad and more cognitively challenging and creative curriculum; teachers need to work and inquire into their teaching together rather than teaching in their classrooms alone; professional learning has to be continuous rather than episodic; teachers’ judgments should be informed by objective evidence as well as by subjective experience and intuition; and the teaching profession needs to develop dispositions of taking risks and welcoming change rather than staying with proven procedures and comfortable routines. Knowledge economy schooling, in other words, demands that we put aside outdated ‘grammars’ of industrial and agrarian models of schooling. It also requires that we abandon their Anglo-Saxon reinvention in the form of narrowly focused, over-tested and highly intensified standardised educational reforms that restrict the curriculum, inhibit creative learning, undermine professional morale, and cut off the supply lines of recruitment of leadership. *Teaching in the Knowledge Society*, in other words, seems to propose moving forward by leaving the past behind.

A second book, *Sustainable Leadership*, appears to advocate the antithesis of this position. Drawing on the development of the concept and practices of sustainability in the environmental movement, the definition of sustainable development in the Brundtland Commission Report of 1987, and the beginning of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005–2015, the book argues against quick-fix Anglo-Saxon reform strategies that impose short-term achievement targets, download a hurried curriculum to younger and younger age groups, encourage teaching to the test in the all consuming curriculum of literacy and numeracy, and promote quick-fix turnaround strategies for teachers in failing schools (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

Drawing on research of 30 years of educational leadership in eight US and Canadian high schools, as well as on our engagement with the literature on environmental and corporate sustainability, Dean Fink and I developed a definition of sustainable leadership:

*Sustainable educational leadership and improvement preserves and develops deep learning for all that spreads and lasts, in ways that do no harm to and indeed create positive benefit for others around us, now and in the future.*

From this definition and our body of research evidence, we then derived seven principles of sustainability in educational change and leadership:

*Sustainable leadership matters.* It preserves, protects and promotes in education what is itself sustaining as an enrichment of life: the fundamental moral purpose of deep, broad and lifelong learning (rather than superficially tested and narrowly

defined literacy and numeracy achievement) for all in commitments to and relationships of abiding care for others. The first principle of sustainable leadership is leadership for learning and leadership for caring for and among others.

*Sustainable leadership lasts.* It preserves and advances the most valuable aspects of life over time, year upon year, from one leader to the next. As Collins and Porras (1994, p. 31) remind us 'all leaders, no matter how charismatic or visionary, eventually die'. The challenges of leadership succession, of leading across and beyond individual leaders over time, are at the very heart of sustainable leadership and educational change.

*Sustainable leadership spreads.* It sustains as well as depends on the leadership of others. In a complex world, no one leader, institution or nation can control everything without help. Sustainable leadership is distributed leadership — as an accurate description of how much leadership is already exercised, and also as an ambition for what leadership can, more deliberately, become.

*Sustainable leadership does no harm to and actively improves the surrounding environment.* It does not raid the best resources of outstanding students and teachers from neighbouring institutions. It does not prosper at other schools' expense. It does no harm to and actively finds ways to share knowledge and resources with neighbouring schools and the local community. Sustainable leadership is not self-centred; it is socially just.

*Sustainable leadership promotes cohesive diversity.* Strong ecosystems are bio-diverse ones. Strong organisations also promote diversity and avoid the standardisation that weakens learning, adaptability and resilience in the face of unexpected changes and threats. Sustainable leadership, by contrast, fosters and learns from diversity in teaching and learning and moves things forward by creating cohesion and networking among its richly varying components.

*Sustainable leadership develops and does not deplete material and human resources.* Sustainable leadership recognises and rewards the organisation's leadership talent in earlier rather than later career. It takes care of its leaders by encouraging them to take care of themselves. It renews people's energy. It does not drain its leaders dry through innovation overload or unrealistic timelines for change. Sustainable leadership is prudent and resourceful leadership that wastes neither its money nor its people.

*Sustainable leadership honours and learns from the best of the past to create an even better future.* Amidst the chaos of change, sustainable leadership is steadfast about preserving and renewing its long-standing purposes. Most change theory is change without a past or a memory. Sustainable leadership revisits and revives organisational memories and honours the wisdom of their bearers as a way to learn from, preserve, then move beyond the best of the past.

Sustainable knowledge societies seem like oxymorons — as do sustainable knowledge society schools. Knowledge societies promote innovation, they prize all that is new, they depend on rapid learning and they champion the pursuit of change. Sustainable schooling, by contrast, values slow and in-depth learning rather than a hurried curriculum, it asks for patience and endurance in the implementation of change, it calls for prudence and resourcefulness rather than energetic and profligate investment, and it promotes the virtues of conserving the past in a world awash with innovation and change.

How can we reconcile innovation and sustainability? How do we build a future on the foundations of the past? How can the energetic innovator and the prudent

Puritan live and work together, side by side? This article seeks to address these questions by drawing on a study funded by the Spencer Foundation of educational leadership and change over 30 years in 8 US and Canadian high schools (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2004; Goodson, 2001).

### **Past, Present and Future**

Sustainable leadership respects future, present and past and builds on the past in its quest to create a better future. Yet educational change theory and practice have no place for the past. The arrow of change moves only in a forward direction. The past is a problem to be ignored or overcome in the rush to get closer to the future (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2004; Goodson, 2001). For those who are attracted, even addicted to change, the past is a repository of regressive and irrational resistance amongst those who like to stay where they are and are emotionally unable to 'let go' of old habits, attachments and beliefs. Or the past is a pejorative, dim and dark age of weak or bad practice that leaves negative legacies of regimented factory models of schooling, or 'uninformed professional judgment' in teaching that get in the way of modernization (Fullan, 2003).

When change has only a present or future tense it becomes the antithesis of sustainability. Sustainable development respects, protects, preserves, and renews all that is valuable in the past and learns from it in order to build a better future. Ancient environments, endangered species, cultural traditions, indigenous knowledge and collective memory are defended and preserved because they are valuable in themselves and are also a powerful source of learning and improvement.<sup>1</sup>

Change theory must get in touch with its past — as a few of its practitioners have already done (Louis & Miles, 1990; Sarason, 1971). It must see teacher resistance and nostalgia amongst more mature members of the profession not just as obstacles to change, but as sources of wisdom and learning that can inform it (Moore, Goodson & Hargreaves, 2006). It must work hard to build proposals for change upon legacies of the past rather than try to ignore or obliterate them. Whenever changes are being considered, sustainable leadership should look to the past for precedents that can be reinvented and refined and for evidence of what has succeeded or failed before. This does not mean living in the past, but it does mean valuing and learning from it.

Abrahamson urges an alternative to what he calls 'creative destruction' — the 'need to obliterate the past to create the future' (Abrahamson, 2004, p. 23) which leads to endless swings of the pendulum, increases in employee burnout, and unnecessary waste of accumulated expertise and memory. The alternative, he proposes, is *creative recombination* which recombines the best parts of the past in a creative, craftsmanlike way that is resourceful yet also renewing — because the combination creates something new from what is already available. Instead of finding new structures, new technology and new people, leaders of change without pain set about 'finding, reusing, redeploying and recombining the mismatched parts that the organisation already has lying around its corporate basement' (Abrahamson, 2004, p. 10).

Sustainable leadership and improvement are about the future *and* the past. They do not treat people's knowledge, experience and careers as disposable waste but as valuable, renewable and recombinable resources. Whilst they should never

blindly endorse the past, sustainable leadership and change should always respect and learn from it.

**Four Forms of Forgetting**

The challenge of educational change is not to respect or retreat to the past but to develop an intelligent relationship to it that acknowledges its existence, understands the meaning it has for those who are the bearers of it, and learns from it wherever and whenever possible.

There are many reasons why organisations need to remember. There are also times when organisations need to forget. Smart organisations not only know the distinction — they also understand when they have to make it.

Pablo Martin de Holan and Nelson Phillips (2004a; 2004b) undertook an illuminating study of the expanding Cuban hotel industry. New hotels, partnering with existing hotel chains outside Cuba, found themselves working with new people in a new culture. How would local Cubans adapt to the capitalist and consumerist hotel culture? How would overseas hotel management staff be able to adapt their existing knowledge to the very different context of Cuban culture? What was important for each of them to remember, and what was it necessary to forget? De Holan and Phillips identified four kinds of what they called *organisational forgetting* in their Cuban case. These were based on whether the process of forgetting was intentional or unintentional and whether it applied to long established or recently acquired knowledge — as in Figure 1 below.

De Holan and his colleagues summarised the options for organisational forgetting and their outcomes like this:

Some companies forget the things they need to know, incurring huge costs to replace the lost knowledge. Other organizations can't forget the things they should and they remain trapped by the past, relying on uncompetitive technologies, dysfunctional corporate cultures, or untenable assumptions about their markets. Successful companies instead are able to move quickly to adapt

	<i>New Knowledge</i>	<i>Established Knowledge</i>
<i>Accidental</i>	Failure to consolidate DISSIPATION	Failure to maintain DEGRADATION
<i>Purposeful</i>	Abandoned innovation SUSPENSION	Managed Unlearning PURGING

FIGURE 1. Modes of Organizational Forgetting (Adapted from P. M. De Holan & Philips, 2004a, p. 166)

to rapidly changing environments by being skilled not only at learning, but also at forgetting. (P. M. De Holan & Philips, 2004b, p. 7).

### **Dissipation**

Dissipation occurs when new knowledge comes into the organisation, but there is no will or way to make it stick, transfer it to others, or embed it in people's memory so that it lasts a long time and helps the organisation to stay effective. Dissipation can be prevented by passing on new knowledge and sharing it. This is something that charismatic leaders find especially hard to do.

Several of the four innovative schools that made up half the sample of the Spencer study thrived under charismatic leaders and leadership — especially in their founding periods. But charismatic leaders rarely deal well with the psychological turmoil incurred by succession. The emperor Caligula murdered half his children. England's ageing Queen will not cede the throne to her eldest child. Tony Blair clings on grimly in his final days of office, laying waste to the party behind him. The Greek God Kronos ate his own son. All these leaders refused to face the facts of succession — of the ultimate mortality that succession events anticipate.

The founding principal of Canada's most innovative high school in the 1970s had 'shoes that were too big to fill'. The calming and guiding leader of a previously fractious and fragmented high school found all her efforts undone when her transfer to another school occurred before she had time to pass the torch to those who would follow her. The son of a policeman who created an energetic, contestational staffroom culture was succeeded unsuccessfully by a former guidance counselor whose laid-back approach could neither blend with nor build on the work of his predecessor. In all cases, new knowledge was never passed on.

In addition to raising knowledge through mentoring and succession, De Holan and Phillips also describe how new knowledge is more likely to stick when it is explicitly connected to and then makes more sense in relation to people's existing or prior knowledge. One of the schools in the Spencer study, for example, was repeatedly able to adapt innovations — such as computer technology — by connecting them to the school's long-standing experience and proud tradition of working outside of mainstream high school practice, in technical and commercial education. Its innovative future was connected through a common vision and narrative to its technically creative past.

### *Degradation*

A second kind of organisational forgetting — degradation — occurs when 'well established knowledge is accidentally lost' (De Holan & Philips, 2004b, p. 3). Knowledge degradation amongst professionals is common when there is 'turnover of critical personnel and their inability or unwillingness to create collective knowledge that would enable a successful collective action without their presence or immediate supervision.' (De Holan & Philips, 2004a, p. 166). Frequent and accelerating leadership succession in less than 5 yearly periods across almost all the Spencer study schools made the erasure of organisational memory, or the incapacity of incoming leaders to understand and draw on it, an ever-present threat. High staff turnover presents similar difficulties — especially in innovative schools where distinctive goals, structures and practices need to be reviewed and renewed

every time new teachers arrive and existing ones leave. Sudden downsizing and elimination of alleged 'waste' in middle level management also leads to degradation as when management losses and budget cuts in the school districts in the Spencer study curtailed their capacity to support the principals in their schools.

## **Suspension**

While a lot of organisational forgetting is accidental, some of it is quite deliberate; a willful strategy to spearhead change and improvement. 'Successful companies', say De Holan and his colleagues, are 'skilled not only at learning, but also at forgetting' (De Holan & Philips, 2004b, p. 51). Collins and Porras identified one of the factors leading to long-standing success in business as the capacity of companies to engage in diverse experimentation, know how and when to keep successful innovations, and when to drop the rest. Management guru, Peter Drucker, described this process as one of *organized abandonment* (Drucker, 2001, p. 74).

The purpose of organised abandonment, Drucker argued, is to 'free up resources that are committed to maintaining things that are no longer producing results' (Drucker, 2001, p. 74). With organised abandonment, the change leader puts everything 'on trial for its life' on a regular basis (Drucker, 2001, p. 74). Organised abandonment is called for when practices are tailing off in effectiveness and/or when they impede or crowd out the introduction of ones that are superior. If abandonment is just a vague intention, Drucker argued, it will never happen. It is too hard to let go of things spontaneously. Instead, organisations need to have regular abandonment meetings — making tough and focused decisions about what to leave behind so there is space for innovation ahead.

For all the complaints about their flurries of new initiatives, a few governments, especially the UK, are addressing the need for organized abandonment in educational policy — by, for instance, cutting back on the prescribed National Curriculum, offering exemptions to succeeding schools that use other designs, lightening the load of external accountability, reducing the impact of external testing on younger children and their teachers, transferring a hundred administrative tasks once handled by classroom teachers to other personnel, and bulldozing down old buildings in poor communities to make way for new ones that are better designed to suit student learning for today (Teachernet, 2005).

It is easy and attractive to abandon tasks and practices you never wanted to do in the first place. Teachers in the Spencer study's Canadian schools, for example, were delighted when work-to-rule action removed the demand for meetings. Some of them said that their classroom teaching had never been better. Others welcomed an end to the mandated policy of destreaming/detracking which, they felt, had been forcing them into new practices that were difficult and unfamiliar. But none of the schools and teachers were able to abandon practices they liked and found comfortable. For this to occur, a more organised, focused, systematic process is required. Although it is rarely easy to forget, organisational abandonment makes certain kinds of forgetting not only feasible, but also deliberate and desirable.

## *Purging*

Sometimes it is important to forget, or at least to unlearn some of the things we have retained and remembered. Poor practices, bad habits, old ways of doing

things that do not meet the needs of new cultures or new times — all these are ripe for organisational purging. De Holan and Phillips describe how it was necessary for Canadian hotel partners not to treat their new Cuban location and its people like a suburb of Montreal, and how Cuban service staff needed to provide the levels of customer service that foreigners liked, not ones that they enjoyed as customers themselves.

Unlearning old practices in which we feel effective and exchanging them for new ones in which our initial competence is low, is neither comfortable nor pleasant. People's temptation to cling on to the past is both normal and understandable. All change involves loss, and when what is to be lost is comfort and competence, the loss will always be mourned and resisted (Marris, 1974).

Some purging of organisational memory is not productive, however. This occurs when the old and experienced are deliberately disvalued. Whether what is to be unlearned or purged are ways of teaching literacy, attitudes towards assessment, procedures for communicating with parents or approaches to running a school, two issues are absolutely central. First, have the areas for unlearning been diagnosed correctly, and is this unlearning educationally desirable or just politically expedient? Second, is the process of knowledge conversion, of replacing unlearning with new learning, managed in a supportive or traumatic manner? Schools and other organisations need to forget the right things in the right way. If the diagnosis or developmental processes of organisational forgetting are wrong, then schools and their leaders will quickly find themselves facing the formidable obstacle of teacher nostalgia in which teachers retreat to the past because of their feelings of embitterment and exclusion in the present.

A group of teachers in one of the Canadian schools was the embodiment of embittered nostalgia. The members of a Coffee Circle of older teachers, many of whom were department heads, regularly met before school in a corner of the staffroom where they recalled how students had changed from 'mostly white kids' 'having fewer problems' who 'had a lot of money . . . and a lot of say in the running of the school'. They came from 'comfortable homes', were 'ready to learn and able to learn', and identified with the school's close, family culture. In contrast, teachers felt that today's students, representing more diverse, less affluent backgrounds, had 'far more to deal with' than earlier generations. Students from 'single family homes had problems just surviving, finding food, clothes . . .' More students required ESL support and generally no longer saw the school as the 'social hub' of their lives. Several teachers cited 'increasing discipline problems', 'poor work habits' and 'short-term concentration'. Another felt that students' attitudes toward authority had deteriorated because parents no longer provided their children with 'the structure and guidance that they need'. An English teacher, with 33 years experience, could not 'imagine' today's students focusing their learning on the classics, such as Shakespeare. A colleague lamented the fact that 'for the first time in history (the school) didn't have a senior football team because there were not enough kids from a background with an interest in football'.

This hearkening back to a more glamorous 'Golden Age' was prompted by teachers' current concerns that government reforms were 'moving too fast' with 'not enough time by any stretch of the imagination' (Moore, Goodson & Hargreaves, 2006). Teachers felt used as 'scapegoats' for perceived failures in the public system. Others reported that 'parents are anxious that their children will not

measure up' and 'don't want to be involved', reforms are 'underfunded', 'teachers lack control', 'the reforms don't help students', it is a 'mechanical process' and 'there are too many unanswered questions'.

The removal of resources due to budget cuts led the Coffee Circle and others to complain that there 'was no money for the teachers to get upgraded', 'no PD days', 'supply teachers were increasingly unavailable', 'assistant department heads were eliminated', and teachers in fewer numbers expressed 'interest in assuming department headships', since there was no longer any release time associated with these more onerous middle-management positions. Political nostalgia for greater professional autonomy, together with personal and social nostalgia for more amenable and motivated students coalesced as these teachers' embitterment with the present magnified their lost glories in the past.

All nostalgia is a recollection of the past that is inflected and infected by an embittered experience of an unsettling present. The nostalgia for professional autonomy and lost missions is counterposed against a contemporary reform backdrop of narrowed vision, standardisation and lost autonomy. The nostalgia for good, mainly white students who wanted to learn in a more professionally intimate environment, contrasts with an uncomfortable present of classrooms characterised by growing racial diversity, increasing numbers of students in poverty and a widening range of students with special educational needs.

Large-scale educational reform often fails because of its anti-nostalgic dismissal or derogation of teachers' professional pasts. This may appeal to public opinion and prejudice, but it also alienates the profession and dismisses the generational missions it holds dear. Anti-nostalgia is not only ethically contentious. It is also strategically problematic because it amplifies widespread resistance to change, and intensifies entrenched and embittered nostalgia among the older teachers it perceives as being in the way. Repelled by the present, experienced teachers seek refuge by romancing the past.

Instead of inspiring experienced teachers to improve their practices, purging and forced forgetting throws older educators back into the false memory of defensive nostalgia — wasting the wisdom of professional elders, and turning them into demoralised teachers and disgruntled colleagues.

### *Renewing the Past*

Overconfident reformers are prone to dismiss the past. Those who are the targets of reform are inclined to romanticise it. And present-time change addicts are trapped in a narcotic bubble that insulates them from it. The challenge that confronts them all is that as we try to create a more fulfilling, successful and sustainable future, we must always acknowledge the past, to preserve what we should from it, and learn from it whenever we can. We should engage with the past but not retreat to it. We should remember the past but not distort it through nostalgia or anti-nostalgia. The past is a subject for intelligent engagement, not blind endorsement. It should be understood together, not inhabited alone, and it should be connected to change and the future through coherent life narratives, not put away or set aside from narratives of change and progress.

The past should be a motivator, not a museum. Indeed, the point of progress is not to ignore or suppress the past but to learn from it and work with it where we

can. William Wordsworth, England's great romantic poet and first conservationist declared '*let us learn from the past, to profit by the present, and from the present to live better in the future*'."

Sustainable leadership and development needs a rear-view mirror as well as a driver's windshield. Without it, things will keep overtaking or rear-ending us. Sometimes the past is a point of pride: it is something to be honoured. When there have been years of conflict, grievance and mistreatment, the past may instead be something that has to be healed. If, as change leaders or change addicts, we do not face our pasts, even the painful parts of it, then we will find that, like people with abused childhoods, we keep repeating the mistakes in it. This is the affliction of repetitive change that has assailed too many of us.

Sustainable leadership, improvement and change connect the future to the past through coherent life narratives and compelling social visions about where the society has been and where it is headed. They pass on knowledge from one generation to the next through effectively managed succession and they distribute this responsibility widely so it is a responsibility of the many, not a burden that falls upon the few.

Our past is part of our future. If we try to push our baggage aside in our rush towards progress, we will only find that we keep falling over it. Prosperity for all is a proper goal, but not at any price. Sustainability and even sheer survival must now be our chief priorities. Standardisation and target-driven competitiveness will do nothing to help us achieve them. And humanistic and creative pedagogies, in schools where every child truly matters, that are steered by trusted systems rather than inundated with unwanted initiatives, offer some of the most promising ways forward.

The knowledge and information society should be able to live with a strong and supportive welfare state. The lion can lie down with the lamb. Prosperity and security have to coexist, side-by-side. The last two decades have been dominated by Anglo-Saxon strategies of soulless standardisation, measurement-driven improvement and forceful intervention that have incurred only widespread poverty and inequity as well as other social waste. It is time for other more sustainable sensibilities to take their place — and the climate is certainly ready for it.

## NOTE

1. The contributions of indigenous knowledge to medical science provide an especially compelling example, given that this indigenous knowledge has often been disregarded by Western research institutions as constituting legitimate intellectual property for the communities that have long possessed it.

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