

Policy borrowing or policy learning? How (not) to improve education systems

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Policy-makers are interested in learning from the experience of other countries, and especially from the countries believed to represent 'best practice'. The influential McKinsey report on "How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better" reflects this interest. Based on a study of 20 'improving systems' it claims to identify policy interventions which enable all school systems to improve. This Briefing questions its methods and conclusions, and argues for a 'policy learning' approach to cross-national comparisons rather than the 'policy borrowing' approach exemplified by McKinsey.

- ▶▶▶▶ A *policy borrowing* approach searches the international experience for examples of a unique, transferable 'best practice'.
- ▶▶▶▶ The McKinsey Report is an example: it claims to show that a unique cluster of policy interventions will produce improvements in any school system at a given point on the spectrum of performance from poor to excellent.
- ▶▶▶▶ Its conclusions rest on a flawed methodology which, among other things, relies on policy-makers' own top-down accounts of their policies and fails to compare improving school systems with non-improving ones.
- ▶▶▶▶ By contrast a *policy learning* approach supports the development of tailored national policies rather than policies taken off-the-peg.
- ▶▶▶▶ It uses international experience for a broader range of purposes, including learning about one's own system, identifying policy options, understanding processes of change and anticipating issues that possible policies would raise.
- ▶▶▶▶ A policy learning approach also learns from a country's own history, and develops forms of governance with effective communication between policy and practice.

Policy borrowing

Policy-makers want to learn from other countries. However, they tend to see foreign experiences as a source of *policy borrowing*, in which 'best practice' from abroad is identified and transferred back home, and overlook the opportunities for more varied and more productive forms of *policy learning*.

This *Briefing* discusses an influential example of the policy borrowing approach: the McKinsey Report on *How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better* (Mourshed et al 2010). It argues that the Report's analysis, and the policy borrowing approach which underlies it, are flawed. By contrast a policy learning approach offers a more promising way to use international experience to inform policy-making.

Policy learning

The term 'policy learning' is used in different ways by researchers in different fields and disciplines. Here, it refers to:

- the *science* of policy learning - that is, the process of drawing valid policy lessons from cross-national comparisons - as distinct from the *sociology* of policy learning, which is the study of the 'learning' which actually takes place (a third type, the *action-research* of policy learning, influences the policy process to bring its outcomes closer to the science: eg Chakroun 2010);
- learning from international comparisons in particular, but also from a country's own policy history or from more effective flows of information between the contexts of policy and practice;
- *learning* as distinct from *borrowing*. Policy borrowing involves searching the international experience for transferable 'best practice'; policy learning uses this experience for a wider range of purposes, including understanding one's own system better, identifying common trends and pressures that affect all systems, clarifying alternative policy strategies and identifying issues raised by each strategy.

The McKinsey Report: a summary

McKinsey focused on 20 national and local school systems which achieved 'significant, sustained and widespread gains in student outcomes on international and national assessments from 1980 onwards' (p.19). In each system it interviewed around ten key informants to identify the policy interventions that had led to the improvement.

All 20 systems had improved, but from very different starting points. They were classified into four improvement journeys - 'poor to fair', 'fair to good', 'good to great' and 'great to excellent' - depending on the range of a universal attainment score which they had climbed. Each improvement journey was associated with particular interventions.

For example, systems making the 'great to excellent' journey (such as Saxony and Singapore) tended to make interventions under the headings of 'cultivating peer-led learning for teachers/principals', 'creating additional support mechanisms for professionals' and 'system-sponsored innovation/experimentation across schools'. Systems making the 'good to great' journey (such as England) tended to make interventions under the headings of 'raising the calibre of entering teachers and principals', 'raising the calibre of existing teachers and principals' and 'school-based decision-making'. Some interventions were common to all journeys: 'revising curriculum and standards', 'reviewing reward and remunerations structure', 'building technical skills of teachers and principals', 'assessing student learning', 'utilising student data to guide delivery' and 'establishing policy documents and education laws'.

The Report is a sophisticated example of a policy borrowing approach. It focuses on improvement rather than simple 'cross-sectional' comparisons, it relates best practice to the system's starting point and it recognises that interventions need to be contextualised. But it is still a policy borrowing approach: it identifies a single model of best practice - a single sequence of interventions across the

improvement trajectory from poor to excellent - and claims that this is applicable in all national contexts.

The McKinsey Report: a critique

Before we can accept the study's conclusions, we need to ask three questions.

(1) *Did the school systems in the study actually improve?* All 20 systems improved their average scores on international assessments such as PISA or TIMSS, or on national assessments relative to other districts or provinces of the same country. McKinsey does not tell us how many systems used the same assessments to set targets; Goodhart's Law predicts that when an indicator is used as a policy target it loses validity as an indicator. Nor does McKinsey tell about improvement on other criteria, such as the 'softer' learning outcomes not covered by the assessments, or the social, cultural and economic impacts of education.

(2) *Did the systems actually make the interventions described in the report?* The study obtained all its information from within the policy bubble: from 'system leaders and their staff who had implemented reforms' (p.132). Its informants had a stake in the perceived success of the interventions and probably believed the policy rhetoric. 'Bottom-up' perspectives or more critical views were not invited. Many interventions described by McKinsey involved devolving power or promoting professionalism. Few serious researchers would accept the authenticity of such interventions on the word of the policy-makers alone. Even when policy-makers believe they have redistributed power, those to whom power is supposed to have been redistributed may see things very differently.

(3) *Was the improvement due to these interventions?* McKinsey made the wrong comparison to identify the interventions that lead to improvement. It compared improving systems at different stages of the trajectory from poor to excellent. It did not compare improving systems with non-improving systems; but without such comparisons, there is no basis for attributing

improvement to the interventions. Indeed, many non-improving systems probably chose the same interventions. As the Report reveals, the improving systems' choice of interventions was often dictated by circumstances rather than any freely-chosen policy strategy. Systems at similar levels of development (attempting the same improvement journey) may face similar circumstances and choose similar policy interventions. Scotland, a non-improving country, followed policies very similar to those of the improving countries attempting the same improvement journey - or so its 'system leaders' would claim.

And despite its discussion of the need to contextualise interventions, McKinsey did not look for interactions with national context in its search for effective interventions.

McKinsey is therefore not a reliable guide to choosing policy interventions. It is a flawed example of a policy borrowing or 'best practice' study, but even a better-designed study of this kind (eg which systematically compared improving and non-improving systems) would probably have been inconclusive. The material in the Report could, however, contribute to an alternative, policy learning, approach.

The policy learning alternative

The policy learning approach can be summarised in terms of six precepts.

(1) *Use international experience to enrich policy analysis, not to short-cut it.* Policy-makers should use other countries' experience, not to provide 'quick fix' solutions to policy challenges, but to inform a learning process through which they can develop policies to suit national aims, needs and circumstances. They should use it as a source of questions as well as answers: to identify different policy options, variables to consider in anticipating possible impacts, typical processes and dynamics of change, practical issues that may arise, and so on.

(2) *Look for good practice not best practice.* Rather than look for (unique) best practice, comparative enquiry should seek examples of

good practice which vary according to time, place, context and circumstance. Good practice may be transferable, but judgements about transferability should be the conclusion and not the starting point of the research.

(3) *Don't study only 'successful' systems.* Studying only successful systems is not the best way to discover the sources of their success. Nor will it reveal the range of issues and factors to consider when designing or implementing a policy, or the things that may go wrong.

(4) *Use international experience to understand your own system.* International comparisons can 'make the familiar strange' and help us to understand our own system. They can illuminate its strengths as well as weaknesses. Policy-makers often pursue a 'deficit' model of reform that tries to correct the presumed weaknesses of their education system. It is equally important to build on its existing strengths such as the institutional uniformity and consistent standards of Scottish schooling, or the English tradition of local process-based innovation.

(5) *Learn from history.* A policy learning approach combines this cross-national learning with a capacity and willingness to learn from the past. Examples are rare. Government structures discourage institutional memory, and the culture of innovation makes policy-makers unwilling to recognise continuities with the past.

(6) *Devise appropriate structures of governance.* School systems should be organised to maximise the opportunities and benefits from continuing policy learning. As McKinsey observed, a middle layer between schools and the centre encourages 'horizontal' learning between schools and mediates 'vertical' learning between schools and the centre. Vertical communications should be upwards and downwards, and unwelcome messages from below should not be filtered out. Effective learning for policy and practice is harder in large, fragmented systems such as England; Scotland's smaller, more uniform system has

greater potential for such learning although this potential is not fully exploited (Raffe & Spours 2007).

Implications

The OECD Review of Scottish schooling proposed a 'national learning effort in which experience is tested and builds into knowledge on which all schools can draw, including beyond the borders of Scotland' (OECD 2007, p.145). This national learning effort should be part of an international process of learning through comparison, but one in which the concept of learning is far broader than a search for best practice for policy borrowing.

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About this study

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