



**STRENGTHENING LOCAL LEADERSHIP TO ADVANCE
QUALITY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR ALL**

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David Towell writes:

Over many years since Inclusion International's Global Congress in Mexico (2006), I have had the privilege of working regularly with education sector and civil society agencies in the different countries of Latin America. In partnership with great people from these countries, I have produced a series of mostly short pamphlets seeking to report and draw lessons from their experience. This is the latest, written with Karen Van Rompeay (Uruguay) and Katty Britto (Peru), impressive leaders in two of the countries I visited during 2023.

In the case of Uruguay I have made four such visits over the last 18 months. In Latin America, Uruguay is a small country, certainly compared with its neighbours, and it has a similarly small population (about 3.5million, more than half of whom live in the urban area around the capital, Montevideo). My time there has included work with both relevant national agencies and education sector interests at the local level in some of Uruguay's 19 territories.

As we shall describe later, the national structure of education in Uruguay is both distinctive and complex, particularly in the variety of national agencies, both Ministries and semi-autonomous administrative bodies, involved.

People in these agencies (and their civil society partners, for example in family associations that campaign on behalf of disadvantaged groups) widely regard this whole system as both fragmented and over-centralised. This pamphlet started its life in a more detailed version addressed to the need for both decentralised and coordinated leadership in the Uruguayan context. However, similar challenges exist in other countries - specifically *how to combine national leadership on law and policy with local leadership in implementing these in ways that are responsive to local opportunities and challenges*. (Of course, these challenges arise in other policy areas: indeed there is a large literature concerned with [Implementing Public Policy](#).)

Reflecting the countries of the authors, we offer three short stories about how this key question has been addressed in Uruguay, Peru and the United Kingdom. Drawing on these examples, we offer some more general reflections for wider consideration.

Introduction

In every country, education is the major investment that the nation makes in equipping children and young people to flourish in a rapidly changing world. The 21st Century agenda is very challenging: ensuring all young people gain from participation in primary and secondary education; adapting the content (i.e. curriculum) and pedagogy to the requirements of work and society in the 2030s and beyond; helping students develop their social and emotional wellbeing as well as acquiring relevant knowledge and skills; ensuring that all students can participate and learn alongside their peers in local schools, etc.

The major thrust of education policy at the global level is succinctly captured in the fourth of the UN Sustainable Development Goals adopted by member states in 2015: 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all'. In an important guide to advancing inclusion, [*Reaching Out To All Learners*](#), UNESCO suggests that a school that reaches out will seek to fully include students who are usually marginalised and excluded, including those with disabilities, those who live in poverty and children from minority groups. This is *inclusive schooling* that we define simply as delivering education through common learning environments where all children and young people learn with their peers in community schools, with the support and adjustments they need.

Education systems are very complex: even in small countries there are thousands of schools and other education centres addressing students of different ages or different aspects of a broad curriculum.

To address these 21st Century challenges through this complexity, national education systems are typically organised in layers: certainly there are usually at least three 'vertical' levels. Clearly there needs to be a 'delivery' level - the 'bottom' - mostly schools, where teachers meet students. There needs to be a 'national' level - the 'top' - which addresses education law, policy and resourcing in ways that have democratic accountability.

But in most countries too, there is an intermediate or 'local' level that plans/manages educational provision to the local population. In both Peru and the UK this level is responsible to elected authorities. In Uruguay, system-wide leadership locally relies more on a variety of coordination arrangements that bring different agencies and different aspects of education together in committee form.

Three stories

Uruguay: Driving policy implementation from the national level

The more detailed version of this pamphlet was produced in July 2023 as a resource to Uruguayan leaders seeking to secure transformative change. As we have noted, the national structure of education in Uruguay is complex. The political system is Presidential and the President appoints Ministers to lead

relevant Ministries, including the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), the Ministry of Social Development (MIDES) - that has a focus on socially disadvantaged groups - and the Ministry of Finance where major resource allocation decisions are made. Uruguay has also created an important national agency, the National Administration for Public Education (ANEP), with responsibility for planning and delivering almost all 'formal' public education at the primary, intermediate and secondary levels. ANEP itself has an internal structure that separates various 'sub-systems' of education (primary, secondary, technical, special education, etc.) into different sections, each employing 'inspectors' who represent their part of ANEP to the localities and the schools/education centres. There are other semi-autonomous national agencies, including the Institute for Children and Adolescents (INAU), whose responsibilities include early childhood services and preschool education.

Recognising the division of responsibilities among a number of Ministries and agencies, there is a lot of attention, nationally and locally, to both formal and informal coordination arrangements. To guide this coordination, national agencies produce some variety of policies and guidance, for example a five year national plan for education coordinated by MEC and a four year development plan from ANEP. In 2023, a national commission also led by MEC that brings different agencies together with participation from civil society associations disseminated a 'protocol' on delivering inclusive education. Together these documents provide a lot of detailed proposals, not always identifying clearly who will be held accountable for their implementation.

Locally, mostly meaning at the Departmental level (although elected local governments at this level have no responsibility for education), the national ministries and agencies have between them mandated a set of formal coordination bodies (characterised as Commissions and round tables), one task of which is to promote the integration of plans and programs taking account of local issues and available resources. Of course, 'coordination' can be an ill-defined word: people appointed to lead these arrangements would need significant authority, capacity and training to be successful.

Moreover, the variety and complexity of 'top down' guidance and instruction make it difficult to identify and agree local priorities and can easily favour the *status quo*. Systematic local planning for education as a whole (as opposed to specific school-based 'projects') is often replaced by incremental efforts that only address parts of important problems. Moreover these cultural and organisational factors, especially the degree of centralization, can limit even school-based innovation.

Our **Commentary** (below) offers a perspective on how these challenges might be addressed.

Peru: From school innovation to sustainable local transformation

Peru is a large middle income state (population 32 million). Like Uruguay it has a Presidential system of government but with the Ministry of Education responsible for public education and 26 elected authorities at the regional level (each with a director of education) responsible for delivery through the schools and other provision.

Between 2019 and 2021, UNICEF provided funds for the first stage of a project ('Más Inclusión') focused on two of the poorest regions of the country: one of which is located in the Peruvian Amazon. (A fuller review of this project is available in [The Journey To Inclusion](#))

For UNICEF to promote this initiative, it required support from both the Ministry and regional management. Its focus however was on a small set of mainstream primary schools in each region. *Más Inclusión* started from the philosophy that inclusive education is a right that every child should enjoy and fundamental to the quality education required to address widespread inequalities. The project team understood inclusive education as a process of continuous improvement by which the educational community reflects on its capacity to serve a diverse range of students, identifies barriers to access, participation and learning, and seeks to address these through strengthening inclusive cultures, policies and practices.

Beginning from a focus on classroom teachers, the project used a number of methods to promote and support change, most importantly the addition of experienced mentors within the schools to facilitate practice development. To sustain this process - indeed to establish whole schools as inclusive communities - it also invested in strengthening school leadership, for example through offering 'action learning sets' to their Principals.

From the outset, the project understood that schools are embedded in two wider environments: their local communities from which students, families and staff are drawn; and the multi-level policy and management system that defines, or certainly shapes, the conditions for local action. It recognised that new ways of working in this wider system would be critically important to sustaining the gains in the project schools, spreading innovation more widely and drawing lessons for education policy.

At the local and regional level (each region includes a small number of districts where regionally-appointed officials monitor schools) these requirements certainly required vision-driven leadership that makes a priority of inclusive education; attention to the whole system so that lessons from innovation are shared 'laterally' between schools and extended to all stages of the education process; and a management style (for example from the district monitoring teams) that moved away from an emphasis on control towards enabling and supporting creative school leadership.

United Kingdom: Participative planning for system-wide local change

The U.K. is a rich and densely-populated European country (68 million), most of whom live in England, a country the size of Uruguay. It is a parliamentary democracy with a Ministry of Education responsible for law, policy and resourcing but with the delivery of public education mostly devolved to elected local authorities that in London are known as boroughs. This is a story from the most diverse and poorest of these boroughs, Newham (population 350,000). (This story is told in more detail in [*Families as Leaders in the Journey to Inclusive Schooling.*](#))

In the 1980s, national policy became more favourable to inclusive education. In Newham an active group of parents of children with disabilities saw this as an opportunity to advance inclusive education and made a mutual commitment to seek mainstream education in local schools for all their children. They sought to work with education officials on how best to deliver this aspiration and one of their members gained election to the authority and subsequently became leader of its education committee.

From the mid-1980s onwards, the authority with this leadership and always the active participation of families began the long journey to radical change in educational provision. The education committee first agreed a radical statement of philosophy that committed the authority to enabling all children and young people to study in appropriate mainstream schools close to their homes. This vision became the basis for a 10-year strategy of reform and a route-map that started from the pre-school years. All young children would be offered places at their local nursery school and these, now more diverse centres, would in turn be supported by a newly-established pre-school teaching team.

As a rich country, the U.K. has traditionally invested in segregated special schools especially for students with disabilities. Newham had six such schools. Over little more than six years all of these were closed with the participation of parents and children: all the resources (staff, equipment, etc.) transferred into the mainstream schools to support these schools in their own journey to ensuring that all students would learn together with their peers.

More than 30 years on these efforts continue and in Newham inclusion is widely accepted as 'this is the way we do things here'. Moreover, despite widespread family disadvantage, schools achieve above national averages on the government's measures of attainment.

Commentary

Of course, these three stories offer no more than short sketches of more complex realities. They show how strategies for educational change must be adapted to each country's governance structures. They also illustrate different approaches to linking national policy and local delivery: the Uruguay story is essentially one of policy-led transformation from the 'top down'; the example from Peru can be characterised as a 'bottom up' process that starts from schools and seeks to build the conditions for sustainable change through improving regional management and informing national policies; the U.K. example points to the importance of coherent leadership with community participation at the level of the local system.

We use these three examples, together with other work, to draw out what is involved in achieving strategic change at the local level (i.e. the whole system of education for a defined population). In particular *we describe the functions of leadership at this level, the capacities required to establish and monitor a strategy for positive change and key elements in the action planning processes required to deliver this strategy.*

The local education system

Local leadership in education is essential for several reasons. The national level has neither the information nor the organisational capacity to monitor or support the large number of education centres locally. Moreover it can't adopt a 'one size fits all' approach: even in small countries there are significant differences between local areas or territories. For example, do they have dense or more scattered populations? How rapidly are these populations changing? Are they relatively rich or relatively poor? Are they well-resourced in relation to education or less so? Are communities within the area strong in social capital or more disorganised? Planning and delivering educational improvement requires a good understanding of each locality and the variations (for example between urban and rural areas) within it.

Similarly, if students, families and other elements of civil society are to be partners with the education system in achieving change, this is much more feasible if organised locally. In delivering change, it helps if leaders in different parts of the system know each other and are able to see what will be required to align different contributions to education (e.g. the transition from primary to secondary schools) in the experience of the students.

Let us look in more detail at this intermediate level. Its main purpose can be defined as:

To plan and manage the provision of education so as to use available resources effectively, fairly and efficiently to meet the needs of the local population in the context of both the national policy framework and local circumstances.

Required local capacities

This purpose involves significant challenges. What are the capacities of local leadership and the other important conditions required to address them productively?

In a pamphlet about the Canadian province (New Brunswick) that is a global pioneer in developing a comprehensive system of inclusive education ([Advancing Inclusive Education](#)), David and Gordon Porter identify lessons from 40 years of New Brunswick experience. Linking this analysis to our three stories, we have identified at least, the following *seven requirements*:

- The national vision, priorities and expectations for improving education are coherently communicated to local leaders;
- They receive national support in developing and implementing rolling education sector improvement plans and are held accountable for their delivery;
- There is clearly identified local leadership (commonly a local director of education and her/his team) with the authority, skills and time to engage other local stakeholders in planning strategic change ;
- Local education leaders work with civil society interests (including student and family representatives) to promote their active participation in shaping and delivering local improvement;
- There is a well-formulated and systematic process for this work;
- Local leaders have created a culture that encourages collaboration among different interests, welcomes innovation and fosters a strong belief in the local capacity for achieving change;
- There are appropriate forums for learning from experience so as to promote continuous improvement in local education for all students.

Planning local transformation

These capacities and processes provide the context within which local leadership seeks to involve a wide range of stakeholders, including both schools and civil society associations, in addressing *three big questions*:

- Where are we going? What is our vision of the local education system required to best serve this purpose?
- Where are we now? How is the system currently performing against the criteria suggested by this vision?
- What actions do we need to take over the coming years to close the gap between vision and performance? What is our road map for sustainable improvement in local education?

At the level of individual schools, there is a lot of experience in developing rolling 'school improvement plans'. Another pamphlet David has produced with Gordon Porter sets out a logic for SIPs in more detail ([The journey to inclusive schooling](#))

At the level of the local system, the rolling *education improvement plans* require a more strategic approach focused on these three questions:

I. Where are we going?

- What is our vision of education for our population? How far is this grounded in the global commitment set out in the fourth Sustainable Development Goal?
- What do national law, policy and plans require of us in the next three years?
- What do local people, including teachers, students and families see as most important in ensuring that all students are accessing good education, participating and achieving - throughout their school careers?

II. Where are we now?

In the light of this vision and priorities, what is our assessment of current local performance? This includes:

- How well are all children and young people gaining access to age-appropriate education? Are school admission policies fully supporting this aim?
- Which students are at risk of discrimination or exclusion and what barriers do they encounter?
- How far are all students benefitting from quality education tailored to their needs?
- How well are students experiencing continuity in their educational experience as they move from early years education through primary and secondary schooling and onto appropriate post-secondary opportunities?
- How well are parents gaining information and support necessary to make good choices for their children and being welcomed as active partners in their education?
- To what extent are educational resources allocated fairly across schools and other education centres?
- How far are all schools accessible, with well-trained teachers and support staff and the equipment necessary to meet the needs of all students?
- How well are schools and education centres demonstrating the leadership and getting the support required to advance their journeys to inclusion?
- How well are local specialist resources (for example, from special education and relevant health services) being used to provide expert support to schools in removing barriers and adapting curricula for student-centred learning?
- How well are teachers and other staff being supported in their own professional development and gaining opportunities to learn from their peers?

- Beyond formal education, how well are all children and young people benefitting from participation in local cultural, leisure and sporting opportunities?

III. What actions do we plan to close the gap between vision and performance?
And how will we monitor progress?

Clearly local *action plans* need to be created through collective consideration of all these questions, identification of available resources and local consultation on priorities.

In Uruguay and elsewhere, the application of these ideas in advancing the journey to quality and inclusive education is work in progress. We are publishing these reflections on experience in our countries as a modest resource to leaders everywhere aspiring to strengthen local leadership. We would like to hear from colleagues elsewhere interested in improving this commentary from wider experience.

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