Focus

This final paper provides a synthesis of the qualitative and quantitative findings from the research. The research upon which the symposium is based was designed to generate empirical understandings about how secondary schools judged to be successful mediate mandatory and non-mandatory government reforms in England and Hong Kong.

Findings and Key Messages

The research shows that in these schools it is too simplistic to focus on policy as implementation and either a top down or bottom up process. Rather, enactments involved more complex sets of interactions between school leaders, the staff and the wider school community, a clear ethical stance and the exercise of autonomy; that they built upon and developed organisational capacity, and were layered into school identified improvement priorities.

Conducting a comparative analysis between schools in contrasting contexts helps to understand better the dynamics underpinning the effectiveness of government reforms in England and complements the system level insights provided by the MacKinsey Report (Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber, 2010).

Leaders determined policy priorities based on factors such as the reputation of the school, its competitiveness within its district, and the legacy of earlier initiatives. Such factors influenced their articulated values, policy acceptance, perception of policy “gaps”, and prioritization of school initiatives. The school with the most autonomy, longest history of success, and highest SES drew on rich resources to enact school-based policies that seemingly anticipated mandates. In other schools, external pressures and professional conditions influenced priorities in selecting policies to emphasize. Across schools, leaders used school-based policies to establish connections that shaped enactment. The schools varied in how structural connections mediated policies; at times drawing connections holistically across a school and at other times framing them hierarchically via departments.

Moreover, school leaders at all levels, especially principals, play a key role in successfully ensuring that externally initiated system level policies are received and mediated and/or reframed so that they support their broader educational values and practices for the improvement of teaching and learning and pupil outcomes in their own schools. The research found that in steering their schools successfully through changing social and policy landscapes, leaders provide optimal conditions, structures and cultures for learning and teaching, enable teachers to interpret, contextualise and reframe external policies in terms of their own educational values, purposes and practices; and through this, sustain their commitment and effectiveness in making a difference to the learning, achievement and life chances of all their students.