Book review: *System Leadership: Policy and practice in the English schools system*, by Susan Cousin

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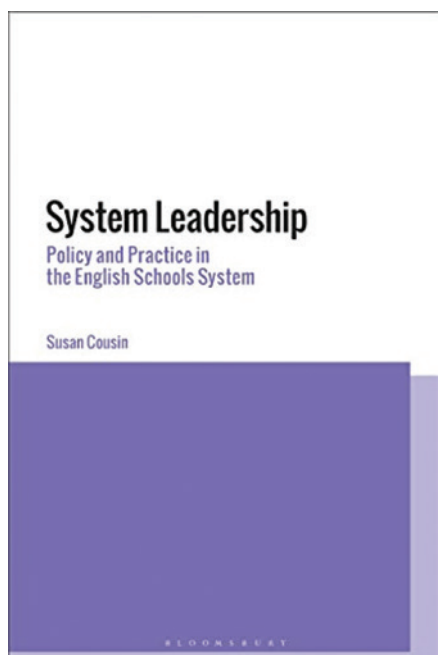*London Review of Education* is a peer-reviewed Open Access journal.

Book review

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System Leadership: Policy and practice in the English schools system, by Susan Cousin

At the start of this book, Susan Cousin defines the notion of a system leader in a straightforward way as a 'headteacher working in a leadership position with schools other than their own' (1). It sounds simple enough, but the reality turns out be both complex and ambiguous. The term was originally introduced into the English system during the Labour era in the mid-2000s, and was credited to the Canadian guru Michael Fullan. At that time, whole-system thinking was in fashion as a guide to policy, as evidenced in the London Challenge programme.

As Cousin indicates, there has been a radical change of direction since then. She takes a governance perspective to her study, and she seeks to throw light on the interaction between leadership style and the governance environment, which is a very necessary endeavour. Since she characterizes the current governance environment as one of 'instability, arising from unmanaged fragmentation combined with the ambiguous, impermanent relationships and opaque accountabilities of networks' (203), the implications for both school and system leadership are bound to be highly charged. Somewhat ironically, Fullan (2011) regards fragmented strategies as an evidence-based 'wrong driver' for whole-system reform.

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One issue is the great variety of roles that the heading appears now to encompass. At one end of the scale, a primary school head who spends some time supporting another school in difficulty would acquire the label, while at the other, the author quotes a document from 2018 by the Department for Education that indicated that it then regarded the eight regional school commissioners as system leaders (220). Whether this is still the case in view of the department's apparent shift towards appointing career civil servants to the role is now in doubt, but it demonstrates what Cousin refers to as 'the range and fluidity of system leadership activity' (173). In between are chief executives and staff of multi-academy trusts, as well as people with many other roles in different contexts.

Then there is the effect of heightened competition and the high-stakes accountability regime. This is based on the assumptions that schools can be confidently labelled in clear categories from outstanding to inadequate, and that their heads can be pronounced successful or unsuccessful, bringing them significant rewards or penalties. Headship has seemingly become a precarious activity, and survival was perceived to be a matter of luck. A school leader who is a National Leader of Education referred in the study to this 'harsh new world' (67). This has been a growing feature of the system since the 1990s, but it was seen as having become even more directive recently. It had reinforced a form of tribalism centred on school groups such as chains, Teaching School Alliances and diocesan groups, in apparent contrast with broader notions of 'system' covering all children. There were references by respondents to building a brand and to distinct models as a unique selling point.

The book is based in part on a doctoral thesis that achieved the BELMAS (British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society) Best Doctoral Award in 2016, although it covers the period 2009 to 2017. The empirical component is focused on four case studies centred on individual system leaders, the heads they were supporting and the policy leads in the civil service, government agencies and local authorities responsible for implementing the policies relating to the 'self-improving school system' (SISS), of which system leadership is an important part. This 'vertical' or multilevel focus is a significant strength of the study. Cousin develops a useful conceptual model linking the degree of centralization/decentralization in governance with directive/distributed leadership, from which she identifies four styles of system leadership practice: the protector, the collaborator, the hero-head and the auditor.

Cousin seems ambivalent about the potential of system leadership. It appears to have support in principle from both policymakers and professionals, so, she asks, why has it 'failed to deliver the hoped-for improvements in student outcomes'? (123). It might be because, as she concludes, the state has retained control after all. The frameworks, standards and accountability have been dominant and 'there is no evidence of school leaders determining and driving educational priorities, or self-regulating' (213). Nevertheless, she says that support and challenge from a system leader, especially when assisted by talented staff, can improve schools. Funding for this activity, for example to cover for time out of school, has generally been inadequate according to respondents. Overall, the evidence of effectiveness is mixed.

This is a broad-ranging study that brings a sharply critical and analytical perspective to an important contemporary debate in educational policy and practice. It will be of value to those making, and those charged with implementing, policy in this area and to everyone else in what might be termed the 'system leadership community', including those involved with the professional development of system leaders, since the book includes a valuable chapter on that important topic.

Overall, one is left with a sense of the unsatisfactory nature of the idea of system leadership. The recent study of SISS by Greany and Higham (2018: 47–50) pronounced system leadership 'a problematic concept' because of the various tensions involved, uncertain allegiances and differing degrees of authority, and they questioned whether many of the leaders should be considered part of a 'co-opted elite'. The roles range from full leadership of another school, or of many other schools, to a collaborative consultancy-type relationship. Is it helpful to attempt to embrace this range of roles within a single concept, which has arguably outgrown the original usage as the post-2010 governments 'upcycled' their predecessor's initiative and gave it a new and significantly altered focus? At the least, as Cousin says, 'There remains … a continuing conceptual elasticity around the concept of system leadership' (52). Maybe it is on the verge of snapping.

This study makes a significant contribution to the theory and practice of educational policy and leadership. Its value is summed up in a concluding statement that 'it is difficult to separate progress towards a self-improving school system from structural reform, with which it has been inextricably interwoven' (217). As this implies, a valid notion of system leadership must surely be predicated on a clear sense of system, which is something that Cousin fully recognizes when she writes of 'the need, repeated in evaluations of system leadership policies, for strategic area-planning and coherent brokerage to deliver effective school-to-school support' (195). The lack of such an area framework or middle tier will severely impede attempts at system improvement until that need is met.

References

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