

## ***School Improvement at Scale Needs a Human Touch***

*Annette Montague*

I consider myself lucky. I have worked in the education sector for over 30 years.

(Insert your own comment!)

I progressed up the leadership ladder in secondary schools and then worked for two national organisations before leading education performance in a local authority.

I am currently Chief Education Officer in a MAT, leading our work with our 30 primary and special academies.

I am also Chair of the Leicester City Primary Partnership, a collaboration of the vast majority of primary schools in Leicester City, including maintained schools and academies.

All this means that I have been privileged to have been to lots of schools across the country and worked with many education organisations.

I consider myself to have worked in the field of 'school improvement at scale' for over 20 years. I have been responsible for a large number of schools in several different roles. And clearly, I am not the only one.

I share all this not because you should be inherently interested in my background but to illustrate that the issue of 'school improvement at scale' is not new; nor is it **not** well understood, which you could be forgiven for thinking if you listen to some voices.

Even more irksome to me, is a view that I feel is developing in the trust sector particularly, that school improvement 'at scale' is more important, more sexy, more worthy of blogging about or 'codifying', than school improvement 'in a school'.

I can bore you to death about how we work at scale at Greenwood Academies Trust. I think we are pretty good at it to be honest.

We have a range of carefully developed systems, processes, activities and information. This is underpinned by a large programme of professional learning and collaborative networks.

We work hard to ensure connectivity between all these strands so our implementation is efficient and precise.

We also do the boring but helpful slog in the background like interpreting the latest tome from our regulator or inspectorate. Our 'trust-level' activities are valued (mostly), impactful and constantly evolving.

But I am clear that this is all value-added, 'icing on the cake' stuff. Because the really, really important element is what happens in each academy.

This is what matters to children and to their families. What we do because we can work 'at scale' does not trump ensuring that we effectively support, enable and challenge each academy to be the best they can be.

This is the big-ticket item. We can have the prettiest dashboards and offer cool CPD opportunities, but if individual schools are struggling, we don't have the balance right.

And whilst that sounds obvious, I think there is a challenge lurking here when working at scale.

You see, I don't think the whole process of school improvement can be fully codified.

We can describe how to develop a strong curriculum and a high quality, inclusive approach to teaching and learning.

We can explain how to develop systems and processes and we can explain how other schools have done 'it'.

We can have a raft of ('judgey') criteria (and pretty dashboards) that tell us how good education provision is.

We can also have lots of experience of different crises so we can calmly advise about next steps around the oft-obscure things that happen on Friday afternoons.

But the reality is that 'next steps' to get 'there' are different for every school, every day - because they have to be based on where the school is at that point and where the people are at.

The decisions about the order of how best to tackle priorities, the way to effectively implement new approaches, the right people to lead strategies are all nuanced around the individual school ecosystem.

And this isn't codifiable.

It's not quite 'voodoo'; probably equal parts knowledge of the school, understanding human behaviour and school improvement experience.

Of course, add into the mix that even with the best designed improvement strategy in the world, things change, all the time.

Staff leave, new staff arrive, staff have illnesses, staff have tragedies. Pupil and family cohorts change, pupils needs' change (sometimes hourly).

Proper, sustainable school improvement reflects this and can remain ambitious and pacey whilst being responsive and pragmatic.

I know there are those that will disagree, but I don't think for most school improvement (certainly not when you are at the stage of evolution rather than rebirth anyway) there is an exact blueprint. It is bespoke and requires agile resourcing.

And this means that, importantly, effective school improvement at scale requires the right people as much as the right structures and processes.

If I think about the different schools that have been transformed within GAT, whilst **what** has been done overall has been reasonably similar, **how** it was done is always completely different because of the people.

I think trust leaders in particular need to remember this - let's not fall into the trap that some public services have when they focus on 'at scale' processes to the detriment of delivery to individuals and by individuals.

So, what's my point? I guess I want to urge any colleagues obsessed with 'school improvement at scale-level' to be just as obsessed with the nuanced, specialised, complex, human world of school improvement at school-level and the people that deliver it.

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