
Thoughts on the 2019 International Summit of the Teaching Profession – By Andreas Schleicher

The expectations we place on teachers are high and growing. We expect them to have a deep and broad understanding of what they teach, how their students learn, and of the students themselves. We also expect them to be passionate, compassionate and thoughtful; to make learning central and encourage students' engagement and responsibility; to respond effectively to the needs of students from different backgrounds and languages; to promote tolerance and social cohesion; to provide continual feedback and assessments of students; and to ensure that students feel valued and included in collaborative learning. We expect teachers to collaborate with each other, and to work with other schools and parents to set common goals and monitor their attainment.

These expectations are so high, in part, because teachers makes such a difference for students' lives. People who are successful today typically had a teacher who took a real interest in their life and aspirations; someone who helped them understand who they are, discover their passions and realise how they can build on their strengths; a teacher who taught them how to love to learn and helped them find ways to contribute to social progress.

But our education systems are not keeping up. Most schools look much the same today as they did a generation ago, and teachers often don't have the opportunities to develop the practices and skills required to meet the diverse needs of today's learners. To help advance the education agenda, the Finnish Ministry of Education, with support from the OECD and Education International, brought together education ministers, union leaders and other teacher leaders in Helsinki this month for the ninth International Summit on the Teaching Profession. Over the years, the Summit has become a seminal event for education policy discourse, with this year's edition attracting 21 education ministers and the union leaders from the best performing and most rapidly improving education systems, as measured by PISA.

One topic of discussion during the Summit focused on how to ensure that schooling remains relevant and sustainable. That means that schools remain places where students want to learn; that they are both intellectually and financially attractive workplaces for teachers; that they deliver inclusive, effective and affordable learning opportunities; and that they command trust and support from parents and society. This is easy to say, but it can be difficult to achieve. As United Kingdom Education Minister John Swinney noted, there is a tussle between the moral purpose of education and the wicked problems that can derail schools and erode trust. In the face of many distractions, it can be hard to keep schools focused on the big picture. Turning a blind eye to the shifts in society is not an answer, either. As Alejandro Tiana, Education Minister of Spain, put it: change affects everybody. We can react in different ways, but we all have to face it.

Sustainability is also about inclusiveness. Union leader Larry Flanagan of the United Kingdom noted that whereas we once organised school systems around differentiation of destination, inclusivity has now become a central and shared goal. It is also one that can be achieved. Shanghai's education leader Li Yong Zhi gave an impressive account of how the province attracts the most talented teachers to the most challenging classrooms and ensures that every learner has access to excellent teaching.

Finally, yet importantly, sustainability is about increasing productivity. Slovenian union leader Branimir Štrukelj reminded delegates that education is increasingly in competition with other public policy priorities. Countries in East Asia will often invest their last resources in the education of their children, who are the future of their country. In much of the Western world, on the other hand, governments have started to borrow money from the next generation to finance consumption today, and prioritise the urgent over the important. Economic and social progress are running straight into a growing pile of debt, so resources for education will remain scarce. In the words of Shanghai's education leader Li, sustainability means thinking harder about how we can reconfigure the people, places, space, time and technology for learning to become more relevant, inclusive and productive.

Another major discussion at this year's Summit focused on building strong foundations for learning, with many delegates highlighting the importance of the early years in a child's life. The rapidly improving evidence base on the most effective provisions and pedagogies to support a child's cognitive, social and emotional development and well-being is beginning to gain traction among both policy-makers and those working in the profession. As a result, the discourse is shifting from access to quality, and from care to learning – or EduCare, as Finnish Education Minister Sanni Grahn-Laasonen called it. Yet while Finland offers early childhood education and care facilities of the highest

quality, Finnish union leader Olli Luukkainen told delegates that parents often have the impression that pre-school is taking something away from childhood, rather than adding something important to it.

How do we build parental trust in providers and provision, and an understanding that childhood does not stop when early childhood education begins – that early learning is not about pushing down schooling, but building strong foundations for learning and life? Spanish Minister Tiana underlined the importance of quality assurance, but that can be a daunting task – especially amid pressure to remedy staff shortages to create places for all children. And union leader Dorota Obidniak of Poland warned us that the vanity of adults can mean that we do not always listen to what our children are telling us that they know.

Where schooling is concerned, we often try to resolve these tensions and dilemmas at the system level. We consult experts and build consensus around what and how students should learn, we build coherent curricula and instructional systems and ensure that we attract staff who can deliver them at the highest possible quality. And we check for results. In early childhood settings, however, we still seem willing to leave all this for a highly fragmented sector to sort out itself. As a result, early childhood education sometimes reinforces social inequality, rather than providing the level playing field that has always been the greatest promise of quality early childhood education and care. In many countries, there is a risk that children who need early childhood education and care the most have less access, and tend to participate in lower-quality services. How do we reach the children who need it most? Why do the pay and education levels we demand of staff remain so far behind what we demand for schooling?

And then there is the issue of financing. Many countries pride themselves on making education free, including university studies. But there seems to be one forgotten group in this: the youngest children, who are still asked to pay tuition even in some of the wealthiest countries. This suggests that we still consider early childhood education as an optional “extra”, rather than an essential foundation for individual and collective success – and one that provides a unique opportunity to develop important social and emotional skills. At the OECD, we generally support an equitable sharing of the costs and benefits of university education between students and taxpayers – through income-contingent loans, for example, or means-tested grants. But that’s not a good recipe for the early childhood education and care. Indeed, there is no educational sector that justifies greater support from the public purse.

Delegates at the Summit also discussed how to develop new approaches to shared leadership. To transform schooling at scale, we don’t just need a clear vision of what is possible; we also need effective strategies to make educational change happen. As union leader Ip Kin-yuen of Hong Kong put it, we must reconcile the need to provide a stable environment for schools with their responsiveness and ability to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

The good news is that our knowledge about what works in education has vastly improved. But knowledge is only as valuable as our capacity to act on it, and the road to educational progress is littered with good ideas that were poorly implemented. One reason for the difficulty we face in reforming education is simply the scale and reach of the sector. And because everyone has participated in education, everyone has an opinion about it. Everyone supports education reform – except for their own children. And even those who promote reform often change their minds after they figure out what change actually means for them. Then there is the issue of losing privilege, because the vast structure of established providers has given rise to many vested interests. It’s sometimes difficult to ask the frogs to clear the swamp. That’s why the status quo has many protectors: stakeholders in education who have a vested interest in preventing change. There is often uncertainty about who will benefit from reforms and to what extent; the costs are short-term and benefits only accrue over time. Ministers may lose an election over education issues, but they rarely win with education, because the fruits of change rarely become apparent within an electoral cycle.

To address these challenges, delegates pointed to the centrality of shared leadership at every level of education systems: teacher leadership, school leadership and system leadership. In the words of union leader Mike Tiruman of Singapore, education needs to be driven by people who feel supported by the system.

Leaders calling for forward-looking changes need to focus resources, build capacity, change work organisations and create the right policy climate, with accountability measures designed to encourage innovation and development, rather than compliance. And they need to go against the grain of the hierarchical bureaucracies that still dominate educational institutions. Educational leaders need to tackle institutional structures that are too often built around the interests and habits of adults, rather than learners.

For schools to be entrepreneurial, system leaders must be able to mobilise the human, social and financial resources needed for innovation; to work as social entrepreneurs themselves both within and beyond their own organisations; and to build stronger linkages across sectors and countries to establish partnerships with government leaders, social entrepreneurs, businesses and civil society.

System leaders need to be aware of how organisational policies and practices can either facilitate or inhibit transformation, and be ready to confront the system where it inhibits change. They need to be design thinkers who are capable of recognising emerging trends and patterns, and seeing how they might benefit or obstruct the innovation they want to achieve. They need to use their knowledge about what motivates people to build support for their plans, and they need to use their understanding of power and influence to build the alliances and coalitions needed to get things done. This means not just planning and initiating change, but, as Slovenian Education Minister Jernej Pikalo reminded us, sustaining it over time.

21st century leaders help rules to become practice, and good practice to become culture. Because it is not programmes but culture which scales and becomes systemic and sustainable. And culture is about system learning, system-wide innovation, and purposeful collaboration. As Singaporean Education Minister Indranee Rajah put it, it is about combining collaborative leadership with a sense of unity, where teachers are respected professionals and where the system is designed to allow them to exercise their professionalism. Leadership is also about making hard choices. As Belgian Education Minister Harald Moller reminded us, curricula are becoming overloaded and need to be made more efficient.

Last but not least, leadership means being transparent with teachers and school leaders about where reform is heading, and what it means for them. As Shanghai education leader Li noted, it is important for each teacher to understand a policy's purpose in order for them to own and implement it. It became clear at the Summit that successful school systems do whatever it takes to develop teachers' ownership of professional practice. Some argue that one cannot give teachers greater autonomy because they lack the capacity and expertise to deliver on it – and there may always be some truth in that. But perpetuating a prescriptive industrial model of teaching will continue to disengage teachers, just as someone trained to heat up pre-cooked hamburgers will rarely become a master chef.

But the pace of change in 21st-century school systems remains the most essential reason that teachers' ownership of their profession is a must-have, rather than an optional extra. Even the most effective attempts to translate a curriculum into classroom practice will drag on for over a decade, because it takes so much time to communicate the goals and methods through the different layers of a system, and to incorporate them into traditional methods of teacher education. In a fast-changing world, where what and how students need to learn changes so rapidly, such a slow process is no longer good enough. The demands of our societies are changing rapidly, vastly outpacing the structural capacity of our governance arrangements to respond. And when fast gets really fast, being slow to adapt makes education systems really slow and disoriented. Even the best education minister can no longer adequately meet the needs of millions of students, hundreds of thousands of teachers and tens of thousands of schools. The challenge is to build on the expertise of teachers and school leaders, and to enlist them in the design of superior policies and practices. Where systems fail to engage teachers in designing change, teachers will rarely help systems implement the change.

This will not be accomplished by simply letting a thousand flowers bloom and asking parents to figure out what schools are best. It requires a carefully crafted set of conditions that can unleash the initiative of teachers and schools and build capacity for change. At the Summit, Portuguese Education Minister Alexandra Leitão explained how Portugal, which used to be a highly centralised system, has reinforced both teacher and student participation in decision-making. She also pointed to the difficulty of reconciling devolution with equity, a point that was underscored by Swedish Education Minister Anna Ekström (Sweden). Finland, however, shows that this can be achieved. It is perhaps the country with the greatest emphasis on devolution, but also one where the closest school is always the best school, and where learning outcomes are both excellent and equitable.

Increased professional autonomy implies challenging idiosyncratic practice. It means moving away from every teacher having their own approach toward the common use of practices agreed to be effective by the profession – making teaching not just an art, but a science, as well. We learned how autonomy in Finland is not primarily about

independence, but about interdependence, professional responsibility and trust. Trust is always an essential part of good governance and a key determinant of where great people want to work. Spanish union leader Maria Luisa emphatically told us of the importance for teachers and schools to be trusted and supported by society. But trust cannot be demanded, legislated or mandated, which is why it is so hard to build into traditional administrative structures. Trust is always intentional; it can only be nurtured and inspired through healthy relationships and constructive transparency. Education International's General Secretary David Edwards put it more succinctly: sustainability is ultimately about trust and healthy relationships.

At a time when command-and-control systems are weakening, building trust is perhaps the most promising way to advance and fuel modern education systems. And trust is what the International Summit of the Teaching Profession is all about. We must get this right. As OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurría so insightfully told delegates at this event, together, they hold the future of humanity in their hands.