Shared Purpose - Provocation Paper

Introduction

Learning both within and beyond the Teach For All network shows that a shared purpose - alignment on what education is for - is critical to system-level change in education. A shared purpose fosters commitment, coordination, and system resilience that endures over time.

But what exactly is the evidence regarding the role of purpose in system change? What are the purposes we are working towards? Which places have changed and co-developed a shared understanding of what education is for? And how do you grow or shift shared purpose?

Story

Enseña Perú engaged an entire community to collectively define a purpose of education, thereby changing the system and improving its outcomes.

In 2016, the year Enseña Perú started working in the Ancash region in the Central Highlands of Perú, education quality compared unfavorably to other regions. Enseña Perú started by building deep partnerships with the local government, the local mining company, other citizens' sector organizations, parents, teachers, students, and community members.

One central piece in establishing a shared purpose was the project 'Ayni,' a grassroots community mobilization meeting to create the education system people are dreaming about. In 2019, 450 community members joined the event to build shared momentum. Moreover, parents, teachers, and policy-makers met in Ugel Huari to share their dreams and visions for their community, and almost 3000 students wrote letters about their dreams for education. At the same time, Enseña Perú built leadership capacity, for example, through ¡Qué Maestro!, a public teacher training program.

Through this combination of building trust and leadership capacity, Ancash was the first region in Perú that developed a shared understanding of the region's collective purpose of education. The vision includes a shared understanding of student success and has resulted in new ways to assess student learning, as well as a collaboration-based, teacher professional development system. Ancash is the first region in Peru to have a regional unit of educational evaluation, and there is strong evidence that Enseña Perú's interventions improved students' academic results.

Perspectives

Who?	When?	What?
Michelle Kaffenberger (RISE)	14:09 – 15:03	Purpose receives little attention and is a missing link when it comes to improving education system outcomes.
Michelle Kaffenberger (RISE)	01:05:08 – 01:06:24	Growing a shared purpose for change (both nationally and community-driven) requires at least a small group of committed leaders.
Shisir Khanal (Teach For Nepal)	00:38 – 01:48	Building a collective, contextualized purpose of education with students, families and communities in rural Nepal for long-term change.

Who?	When?	What?
DEAP School Navajo Nation	00:00 – 01:02	A public charter school built on a new purpose of education (indigenization, healing, decolonization) that is rooted in local values and community
Suchetha Bhat (Dream a Dream)	56:18 – 58:20	Dream a Dream's process for building a shared purpose starts with self-reflection inside oneself individually, as well as the organization.

"For taking a collective approach, don't work from assumptions about what is needed, but put in the time to listen and learn. We focus on building a national network of place-based organizations to learn fast from one another and on building purpose and collective buy-in, rather than delivery" Graeme Duncan, Right to Succeed

"My relationship to "purpose" shifted from chasing purpose to receiving purpose and living it every day. Why should we chase a purpose when we can receive and live by it every day?" Monirath Siv, Teach For Cambodia

"Systemic barriers come in the way of young people, so you have to place a shared purpose of education in values such as dignity, equity, and inclusion." Suchetha Bhat, Dream a Dream

"I have become convinced that putting power in the hands of students to drive their own purpose in education is one of the most important changes in education during our time." Franco Mosso, Enseña Perú

"There's the tactical aspect about behavior change - painting a clear vision, getting people bought in understanding the rationale, making it easy to do the right things, and supporting and championing them along the way. But the underlying question is ' Who has the privilege of the right to mandate the change? Who is setting the agenda and why? And what are their known and unknown intents and beliefs that are driving that?" Tomos Davies, Frontline

"Only the hood can save the hood. Our communities need to lead the way. We are all responsible for education and what it does to all young people. I like to use the word co-conspire, not empower - as that implies that others are giving power. They already have it." – Michelle Johansson, Teach First New Zealand
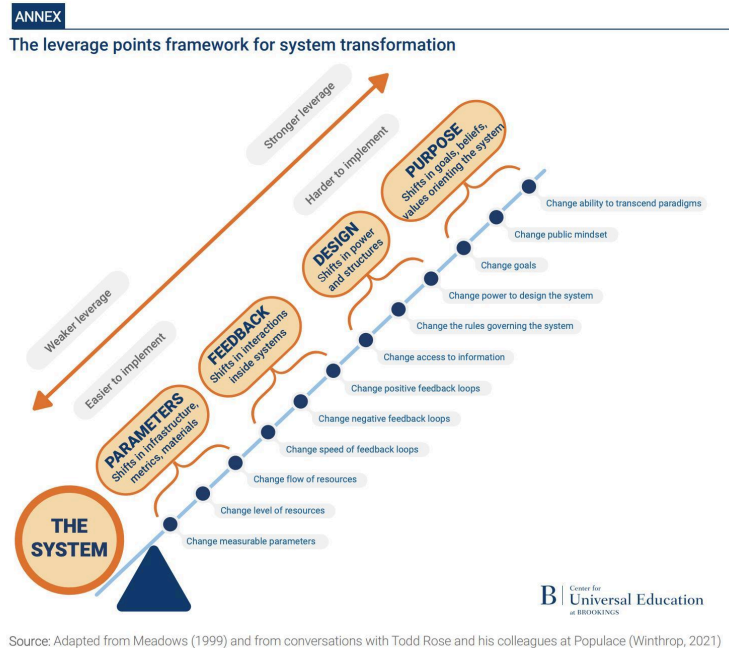
"The systems we often take for granted—political systems, how we structure our companies, the way our cities are designed—are all human-made systems. We created them to suit our purposes, to solve our problems, or facilitate advancements. The problem is that as a species, we have progressed to the point where many of our systems are now outdated or entirely obsolete." – Imagine If, Kate & Ken Robinson

"What it initially brought us to this work was towards equity, like, you know, ensuring that this education system with its implicit purpose, and goals are working for all kids. But we realized that would not be sufficient and that we would need to work to ensure that the students in our classrooms develop as leaders who can shape a better future for themselves and all of us. And we could say that at the global level, and all of us could agree that that will be our orienting purpose. But that's not sufficient, right? Ultimately, we need to come together in every diverse community across the world, with diverse stakeholders, students and families and educators, and other civic leaders, and others to reflect on this question, what does this look like in our given community, to ensure that students in this community are developing as leaders who can shape a better future, considering our local values and, and culture and history, considering the actual challenges and opportunities facing kids. What is that going to look like within this particular context?" – Wendy Kopp at RewirEd Panel in Dubai 2021

Evidence

Several studies, both in and outside of education, attest to the importance of developing a shared understanding of a system's purpose for long-term system change. Widely shared goals and beliefs enable sustainable transformation that endures political leadership changes and different allocations of resources.

One widely accepted theory in system change is the Leverage Points Framework by Donella Meadows. Meadows, a pioneer in system dynamics, argues that complex systems, like education, are often resistant to change because interventions remain on superficial levels such as infrastructure or regulations.

The leverage points framework for system transformation

Source: Adapted from Meadows (1999) and from conversations with Todd Rose and his colleagues at Populace (Winthrop, 2021)

The 12 identified places to intervene in a system reveal that shifting the invisible lever purpose - changing goals, values, beliefs, and mindsets, orienting the system - is hardest to implement but has the strongest leverage for system change. A purpose guides the transformation of many other system parts, such as resource flows, feedback loops, rules, and regulations.

Different studies show leaders often fail to change education systems because they aim to change the visible, lower-leverage elements of a system (resource flows, regulations, metrics) without changing the invisible elements such as the purpose (mindsets, goals, beliefs, and values).

RISE, an organization that has been studying education systems worldwide for 10 years, shares this observation. Specifically, research from RISE highlights most interventions focus on visible technical practices or support functions, while purpose receives little attention. RISE concludes a consensus-based commitment to the purpose of learning is a critical missing link to addressing the learning crisis. RISE found that shared purpose was a driver of progress in Brazil, Vietnam, and Tanzania.
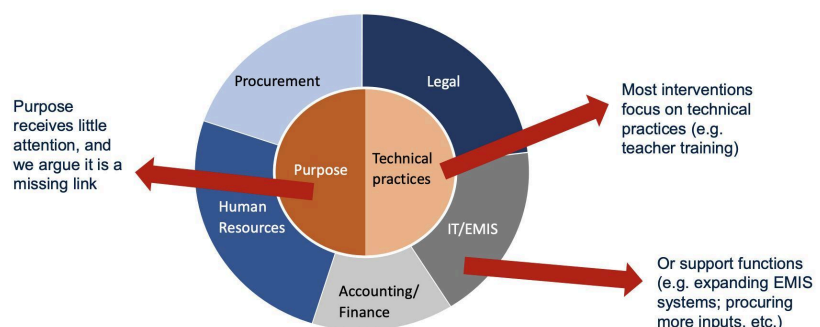
Other research corroborates the importance of purpose for system change.

For example, the Center for Universal Education at Brookings published a policy brief arguing system change "must entail a fresh review of the goals of your system" and developing a broadly shared vision and purpose.

Moreover, global research led by Big Change, working with RewirED, Teach for All, HundrED, OECD, and others, identified purpose to be one of the three levers for transforming systems and indicate three actions; involving the public and communities, and especially young people, in defining the new purpose; reveal and challenge the shared assumptions blocking transformation through inclusive and supported dialogues; and discover, connect and amplify new alliances.

In addition, Adam Barton identified defining and aligning collective values is crucial for sustained educational change. Consistently, leaders highlighted the relevance of defining a shared purpose - having a coherent why - for reform efforts. One OECD study also attests to alignment across communities and teachers and education leaders on the values and goals of reform as a key enabling factor to changing education systems.

Examples

Teach For Cambodia strives towards a purpose of education that enables the younger generation to shape the future of Cambodia. Working in a society in which people have come from war and genocide, they do so by rebuilding trust, working through trauma, and orienting towards equity to create systemic conditions in which shared actions can achieve shared goals.

Enseña Perú continues to engage an entire community to collectively define a purpose of education by creating systems and structures for shared goal setting, strategy setting, and monitoring. Ancash - a region with a history of unfavorable education quality - is the first region in Peru to have a regional unit of educational evaluation, a key policy, and is also leading in the creation of the whole region's collective vision for education.

In Caruaru, Brasil, Ensina Brasil undertakes a networked ecosystem mapping process in which local leaders leverage their communities to develop a shared understanding of students' biggest challenges to discover levers and opportunities for action. By broadening their reach beyond immediate existing allies, they aim to reach a wider, more diverse set of voices and to develop a truly collective understanding of inequity and potential solutions.

In Haiti, Anseye Pou Ayiti is working with communities to create a network of civic leaders to develop community-centered solutions and transform their nation's education system based on shared history, values, and vision. Bendjimy Pierre, alumni and ambassador, says: "Community members know what their children deserve, and they have a vision for what and who the children can become tomorrow."

Ontario, Canada achieved large-scale system change by building inter-professional relationships and a shared political commitment to inclusive processes, which led to establishing shared goals for educational improvement. Today, Ontario's publicly funded education system is acknowledged as one of the best in the world.

To take action against decreasing pass rates of primary schools leaving exam and poor results in foundational skills, the government of Tanzania set the purpose of education to improve reading, writing, and arithmetic. The clearly articulated purpose helped achieve coherence to a common goal among a broad range of stakeholders and ultimately improved learning outcomes.

Portugal's ministry for education co-created a new purpose by including parents, students, and communities for curriculum reforms. Public demand exceeded the ministry's expectations. Pilots were monitored by regional teams that liaised with local school clusters.

Ottawa, Canada, consulted over 1,000 education stakeholders such as families and employers to define what success along different life pathways looks like. Results fed into a renewed purpose of education. This new strategic plan was used by schools to reimagine their pedagogical practice.

Sierra Leone built a locally rooted but globally informed vision for the purpose of education that receives broad support. The country co-developed a shared purpose through consultations across all districts that involved parent organizations, teachers associations, disabled person organizations, development and donor partners, and government personnel outside of education

In Sobral, Brazil, education leaders established learning as core purpose, for example, by committing to all 6- and 7-year-olds learn to read. Dedication to purpose filtered through all levels of the system as a collective commitment to learning. Technical practices and support functions were improved to achieve this purpose. In just 12 years, Sobral, Brazil went from the 1,366th municipality for learning to the top performer in 2017 in the national basic education ranking.

In a multi-stakeholder process, Dream a Dream redefines and acts upon a new purpose for education in India: children develop capacities that lead to a life of meaning, contentment, and well-being. In collaboration with many other experts and NGOs, they launched a curriculum that develops mindfulness, social-emotional learning, critical thinking, problem-solving and relationship-building skills.

The Lego Foundation, Big Change, and The Center for Universal Education at Brookings launched the Big Education Conversation, an initiative that supports a million inclusive conversations about the purpose of education across the globe.

Bhutan, as outlined by Populace in 'Systems change - a leader's guide to leverage points', has redefined its purpose from growing the economy to growing happiness. To track progress towards this new objective, decision-makers created the Gross National Happiness: good governance, sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, preservation and promotion of culture, and environmental conversation.

At Green Schools, operating in Bali, New Zealand, Mexico, and South Africa; students, parents, and teachers share a single, explicit purpose; to grow a generation of global green leaders and citizens committed to taking better care of our planet.

Insights

What is the role of shared purpose in system change?

Whether implicit or explicit, conscious or unconscious, **every system has a purpose**; the highest objective, an organizing principle. **From that overarching north star, everything else follows**.

That's why **purpose is the most powerful leverage point in system change**; a small shift can produce significant changes in system behavior. So to change a system, we need to change what it is for. To transform the education system, we must collectively question and redefine the purpose it serves.

Evidence and examples from across the network and beyond reveal that a **collective commitment to a shared purpose is critical to system-level progress**. A shared purpose enables coherent, meaningful, and sustainable system change. Examples from countries such as Tanzania and Portugal show **a shared purpose fosters commitment, coordination, and resilience across a coalition of actors**.

Yet, despite clear evidence for the importance of purpose in system change, most transformation efforts don't start with questioning the existing purpose, nor with an articulation or co-development of a new purpose. Instead, most interventions in systems focus on technical practices (e.g., teacher training) or support functions (e.g., staffing), while the purpose receives very little attention.

What purpose are we working towards?

Before answering what purpose we're working towards, we need to answer who has determined and is determining that purpose. Who is deciding the why? Who sets the purpose of education in our context? Who has the privilege of the right to mandate the change? And what are the power-holders known and unknown intents and beliefs that are driving that purpose?

If one thing became clear from the network learning and the case studies, it's that **the purpose of education can't and shouldn't be determined by others, for example, by people outside of the community**. If you haven't lived in a context, you shouldn't decide what's fundamental and relevant. As examples such as Anseye Pou Ayiti show, the purpose, or purposes of education, need to be rooted in local values and the local understanding of what's needed, considering history and teachings.

Against the backdrop of recognizing the uniqueness of each context, similarities in the purpose of education emerge across different network partners and countries. **Endeavors across the network to co-create a shared purpose root in related values**, such as those mentioned by Dream a Dream: dignity, equity, and inclusion. **How these values translate to purpose depends on the needs and hopes of each community**. Examples of community and country-specific purposes range from collective healing and youth empowerment for change in Cambodia to improving foundational skills in Tanzania or growing a generation of global climate activists at Green Schools.

How do you grow or shift shared purpose?

Growing or shifting a shared purpose is **easier when the community acknowledges a mismatch between the current education system and the community's needs**. The dynamic between systemic challenge and possibility allows for systemic opportunity. Criticism and dissatisfaction can provoke questions about the system's purpose and the desire for change.

If there is no desire for change, introducing new information can unleash dynamics and shift purpose. It's easy to not address things that are hidden, Michelle Kaffenberger from RISE explains. **New information, for example, on learning outcomes, can drive attention and spur action**.

Given there is a systemic opportunity, how to grow and shift shared purpose at a system level, leader level, and practical level?

At a system level, shifting the purpose is often a mix of a directive and an emergent approach and, ideally, a mix of top-down and bottom-up approaches.

Analyzing the outlined examples and evidence, changing the purpose of education can happen top-down (nationally-driven) and bottom-up (community-driven).

Different countries and communities include the broader public in growing and shifting the purpose of education. In some cases, such as Sierra Leone, Canada, and Portugal, this change is initiated from the governmental level. In other cases, as demonstrated by Enseña Perú in the Ancash region, or Subject to Change in the UK, shifting the purpose starts through community-led society-wide action.

On a macro level, research from RISE identified three overarching actions to foster a system's commitment to the purpose of learning: funding learning assessments to spur citizen-led attention, supporting domestic think and do-tanks, and funding programs for tomorrow's leaders.

As a leader, facilitate but let the community shape and guide the change.

Research and network examples show both approaches (top-down and bottom-up) for growing or shifting a shared purpose require a group of committed leaders to drive this change. But system

transformation doesn't work unless the people who are affected by the education system are leading the movement. The local community needs to co-create and buy into the purpose of education in their context, as demonstrated successfully through the collective vision setting in Sobral, Brasil.

On a practical level, this translates to listening and creating spaces to ask and answer deep questions.

People don't surface long-held fears, hopes, and beliefs during arguments. What almost all of the above examples have in common are spaces for authentic listening very early in and throughout the change process. Teach For Nepal and Enseña Perú, for example, built trust and asked a lot of questions which then created a reflective, inclusive, and deliberate space where diverse people share insights, ideas, and suggestions. Facilitating conversations that include students, parents, educators, community members, and government leaders can help people develop a shared vision for education that translates to long-term change in their community or country.

Questions / What's next?

What do we mean by purpose? Examples and research attach different meanings to the terminology. Purpose is sometimes confused with missions and goals, targets, and outcomes. But purpose is deeper than a mission. As The system innovation initiative defines: "A real sense of purpose is anchored in identity (who we are, what matters to us), intent (what change we want to bring about), and action (how we can make this change demonstrable)."

What are the main barriers when it comes to creating a shared purpose, and how to overcome them?

These involve questions such as: How do you make people and communities invest in a shared purpose when it requires extra time/energy up-front? How can co-creating a shared purpose, a long coalitional approach that goes against the dynamics of democratic politics, be prioritized in short-term policy-making environments; especially when efforts do not yield immediate results? And how to implement and act upon a co-defined purpose for education?

Useful Links

- Community Impact Conversation 1 – Purpose: full call recording (passcode: vb.2!g5e)
- Quotes from the call: Video note-taking – Purpose
- Transforming education systems: Why, what, and how – Center for Universal Education at Brookings
- Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System
- RISE – Aligning Education Systems for Learning: How Systems Shift
- A three-stage process to develop a new sense of purpose for a system
- A New Education Story
- RISE Podcast – Luis Crouch on purpose and complexity in education systems change
- Applying Systems Thinking to Education: The RISE Systems Framework

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