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POWERFUL LEARNING, POWERFUL TEACHING AND  
POWERFUL SCHOOLS\*

**ABSTRACT.** This paper is a personal reflection on the purpose and scope of school improvement. In explaining why in education the more things change the more they stay the same, I clarify the focus of educational reform as being powerful learning on the part of students, and then demonstrate that this occurs in contexts where content is conceptual rather than particular, where learning is constructive inquiry not passive reception, and where the social climate is expansive instead of restrictive. Such classrooms exist in schools whose organisational conditions and cultures are characterised by high expectations, collaboration and innovation. Finally I argue that equity and high standards require a coherent policy framework that emphasises process as well as substance.

Those of us who spend much of our professional lives labouring in that part of the educational vineyard known as “school improvement” have recently been celebrating. For decades now we have been the poor relations of the field – tolerated, rather than being regarded as a main player. But as Western societies have in recent years grappled with the challenges of economic growth and social dislocation, our particular contribution to educational change has increasingly been recognised as important and helpful. As societies continue to set educational goals that are, on current performance, beyond the capacity of the system to deliver, those whose work focuses on strategies for enhancing student learning through school and classroom intervention are taken more seriously.

At the same time as pressure on schools and school systems have increased, so too has the context of schooling changed dramatically. In most Western educational systems there has been a move from a somewhat paternalistic approach to education to a situation where schools are not only encouraged, but are increasingly required, to take responsibility for their own development. The emphasis on self-improvement has increased in the past decade as a consequence of the trend in most Western countries of decentralising the responsibility for the implementation of educational reform. Alongside this increase in political pressure for institutional renewal, there has been a steady realisation that traditional

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strategies for educational change are not working. In recent years it has become starkly apparent that as strategies for educational reform, neither centralisation nor decentralisation work and that a better way must be found.

Many of the educational initiatives that have been recently spawned under the school improvement umbrella are unfortunately, however, simply tinkering at the edges. Governments whose policies emphasise accountability and managerial change fail to realise that if teachers knew how to teach more effectively they would themselves have done so decades ago. Blaming teachers and delegating financial responsibility have little positive impact on classroom practice. Similarly, Heads or Principals that restrict their influence to bureaucratic intervention and ignore the 'learning level' should not be surprised when student achievement scores fail to rise.

This is the rather bleak context within which school improvement has to operate at the turn of the century. It is a situation that is predisposed towards short-term remedies for profound problems, in organisational settings not always conducive to enhancing levels of student achievement and learning. The emergence of school improvement from the shadows is therefore a mixed blessing. As with any new idea, much is expected of it, particularly from politicians desperately seeking simple and rapid solutions to complex challenges. School improvement's time in the sun will be short lived unless it can persuade its new found friends that it is not a "quick fix" response to educational change.

My purpose in this paper is to outline an approach to school improvement – which I define as a strategy for educational change that focuses on student achievement by modifying classroom practice and adapting the management arrangements within the school to support teaching and learning – that has a medium term and systemic orientation (Hopkins, Ainscow & West, 1994: 3). It is only through viewing school improvement holistically and by adopting a purposeful and strategic response that the challenge of enhancing student achievement will be met.

I say this because it is becoming increasingly clear to me that most school improvement efforts do not drive down to the 'learning level'. Unless school improvement strategies impact directly on learning and achievement then we are surely wasting our time. This concern is well caught in Michael Huberman's graphic warning (in Fullan, 1992: 11):

By not addressing the impact on pupils, we will have indulged in some magical thinking as before: that adoption meant implementation ...that implementation meant institutionalisation ...that enhanced teacher capacity means enhanced pupil achievement or development. ...If changes in organisational and instructional practices are not followed down to the level of effects on pupils, we will have to admit more openly that we

are essentially investing in staff development rather than in the improvement of pupils' abilities.

The move towards 'restructuring' in the US provides a further example of this pathology. As Richard Elmore (1995: 357) notes:

This current incapacity of policymakers to connect broad-scale policy fixes with the details of teaching and learning in schools is part of a long historical tradition in the United States. . . . So the gap between best practice and ordinary practice, and the lack of closure between policy and practice, is a recurring problem that reveals a deep incapacity of schools to engage in cumulative learning over time directed at tangible results for students.

Elmore (1995: 366) later expands on this point by explaining that:

Principles of [best] practice [related to teaching and learning] . . . have difficulty taking root in schools for essentially two reasons: (a) they require content knowledge and pedagogical skill that few teachers presently have, and (b) they challenge certain basic patterns in the organisation of schooling. Neither problem can be solved independently of the other, nor is teaching practice likely to change in the absence of solutions that operate simultaneously on both fronts.

What Elmore is arguing for is an approach to educational change that at the same focuses on organisational conditions of the school as well as the organisation of teaching and learning. The more the organisation of the school remains the same the less likely will there be changes in classroom practice that directly and positively impact on student learning. It is for reasons such as this that I argue that current reform initiatives cannot lead to enhanced levels of student learning and achievement. It also explains as is seen throughout this paper why the approach to school improvement that we have developed is directed at simultaneous change at both classroom and school levels.

Hence the title of the paper – 'Powerful learning, powerful teaching, powerful schools'. I shall discuss each of these themes in turn and demonstrate the integration between them. For these are the essential ingredients of a programme of educational reform that is serious about improving the quality of student learning (see Hopkins, 2000).

#### POWERFUL LEARNING

There has been of late a narrowing of the conventional definition of effective student learning. As compared with even ten years ago, 'effective student learning' is commonly equated with SAT scores or GCSE A–C results, rather than something broader. Although the shift of focus to student outcomes is to be applauded – schools in particular, and the system in general, are now taking more responsibility for student learning – there

are some dangers too. Political orthodoxy is increasingly adopting *de facto* such specific outcome measures as a proxy indication of other aspects of learning. In other words, learning and attainment are becoming too easily equated. This widespread tendency is the result of the political battle over education and can only lead to a reductionist and impoverished interpretation of what constitutes learning. Powerful learning is more than just exam results and test scores.

To me, powerful learning subsumes a range of cognitive and affective processes and outcomes. My vision is of students engaged in compelling learning situations, created by skilful teachers in school settings designed to promote learning for both groups of people. Two examples illustrate my theme that such situations are attainable for all students.

The 'Cognitive Acceleration through Science Education' (CASE) project, based at King's College in London, has reported some striking long-term effects of secondary children's academic achievement. The researchers, Philip Adey and Michael Shayer, claim successful intervention for between 25 and 50 per cent of children taught using CASE teaching strategies (Adey and Shayer, 1994). The results indicate that, through CASE, it is possible to increase significantly the proportion of children passing not only GCSE science, but also by extension GCSE mathematics and English. Groups of children who participate in the CASE intervention programme during Key Stage 3 are found to achieve significantly higher grades at GCSE examinations in science, mathematics and English than matched control groups. New data becoming available replicate and exceed (on a larger scale) the originally reported effects of immediate cognitive acceleration and longer-term academic improvement.

The central tenet of CASE is that a particular set of teaching strategies can accelerate children's intellectual development, their ability to think and, in the longer term, can serve to improve their academic achievement. CASE provides a 70-minute activity in science every two weeks for two school years. Teachers are given in-service training to run and implement these activities. The lessons involve children in problem-solving activities aimed at developing their capacity to find their own solutions and increase their awareness of how they reached these solutions. Adey and Shayer (1990: 269) argue that it is the process of constructing their own meanings, which enables children to develop their general thinking skills or intellectual abilities:

If effectiveness of learning is determined by the general strategies available to the child, then training in those strategies will allow a child to leapfrog over the detail into a higher level of abstraction, from which rapid assimilation of detail becomes possible.

By creating such powerful learning situations, CASE teachers are instrumental in raising the levels of achievement of their students. There are many research studies that support this general conclusion, and some that demonstrate that such powerful learning contexts can also compensate for social disadvantage. For example, in a research study of learning through Group Investigation, Sholomo Sharan and Hana Shachar (1988) illustrated, like Adey and Shayer, that students can rapidly accelerate their learning rates. In addition, their study focused on a problem that exists in many societies; that students whose families are regarded as socially and economically disadvantaged frequently display low achievement.

Sharon and Shachar prepared social studies teachers to organise their students into learning communities and then compared the classroom interaction and academic achievement with classes taught by the customary 'whole class' method. In Israel, where the study was conducted, Middle-Eastern origin students generally belong to the 'disadvantaged' population, whereas European origin students generally are more advantaged. In their study students from both origins were mixed in classes. The research design compared the achievement of the students who were taught using Group Investigation with the students taught by the 'whole class' method most common in Israeli schools.

The Middle-Eastern students taught with Group Investigation methods achieved average gains nearly two-and-a-half times those of the Middle-Eastern students taught as a whole class. These normally disadvantaged students also achieved larger average gains than did the European origin students taught by the more typical 'whole class' method and actually exceeded them on the post-test by about half a standard deviation. In other words, the 'socially-disadvantaged' students taught with Group Investigation learned at rates above those of the 'socially advantaged' students who were taught by teachers who did not have the Group Investigation method within their teaching repertoire. The average gain by the Western origin students taught with Group Investigation was *twice* that of their 'whole class' counterparts. Thus the model was effective for students from both backgrounds and by a large margin.

These are just two examples from a vast array of evidence that suggests that the way in which the learning experience is organised can make a big difference to students in our schools. The impact is not just on test scores and examination results, but also on the students' learning capability and, I suggest their self-esteem. Powerful learning therefore refers to the ability of learners to respond successfully to the tasks that they are set, as well as the tasks they set themselves – in particular to:

- integrate prior and new knowledge

- acquire and use a range of learning skills
- solve problems individually and in groups
- think carefully about their successes and failures
- evaluate conflicting evidence and to think critically
- accept that learning involves uncertainty and difficulty.

The development of such a range of learning strategies is commonly termed meta-cognition, which refers to the learner's ability to take control over their own learning processes.

The important point is that powerful learning in the way that I have defined it does not occur by accident. It is usually the result of an effective learning situation created by a skilful teacher. As Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers (1991: 12) put it:

Knowing this is the core of effective teaching, because effective teachers are confident that they can make a difference and that the difference is made by increasing their own teaching repertoires and the learning repertoires of their students.

It is this link – between powerful learning and powerful teaching – that is developed in the following section. Put simply, powerful teachers believe that all children can learn and that they can teach all children. More pertinently, they convey this message to their students.

#### POWERFUL TEACHING

I am convinced that the teacher's task is not simply to teach, but to create powerful contexts for learning. In our book *Models of Learning – Tools for Teaching* (Joyce, Calhoun & Hopkins, 1997: 7) we express it like this:

Learning experiences are composed of content, process and social climate. As teachers we create for and with our children opportunities to explore and build important areas of knowledge, develop powerful tools for learning, and live in humanising social conditions.

Our toolbox is the models of teaching, actually models for learning, that simultaneously define the nature of the content, the learning strategies, and the arrangements for social interaction that create the learning environments for our students.

Interestingly, the most powerful models of teaching adapt flexibility to a wide spectrum of curriculum areas and type of learners. They work when teaching phonics and physics. They help both the 'gifted' and those most 'at risk' of failure. They do not tolerate socio-economic or gender differences as inhibitors of learning but, instead, capitalise on them. Their effects are enhanced by variety in cultural and linguistic background.

It is the integration of 'content, process and social climate' that puts the 'power' into the powerful learning experience. It was reading Jerome Bruner's book, *Towards a Theory of Instruction* some 20 years ago, and particularly the following quotation that first started me thinking about the dialectic between curriculum, teaching and learning (Bruner, 1966: 21):

... a theory of development must be linked both to a theory of knowledge and to a theory of instruction, or be doomed to triviality.

Bruner helped me realise that teaching is more than just presenting material, it is about infusing curriculum content with appropriate instructional strategies that are selected in order to achieve the learning goals the teacher has for her students. If powerful teaching is about creating powerful learning experiences for students, there is a major impediment to achieving powerful learning in England and Wales. We do not have a sufficiently robust and sophisticated language in this country for teaching. Language defines us. As teachers, if we had a more extensive vocabulary, we too could exercise more control over the learning environments of our students. A key task for those of us committed to enhancing the learning of pupils, therefore, is to expand the vocabulary of teaching.

Over the past couple of years I have been making some modest contributions to this necessary endeavor (see Hopkins, Ainscow & West, 1994, Chapter 4; Hopkins, 1996). My own attempt to contribute to such a framework and language for teaching revolves around three aspects of teaching that are often regarded as being contradictory rather than complementary. I refer to:

- teaching skills
- teaching relationships
- teaching models

*Teaching skills.* There is an extensive research literature on teaching effects. Consistently high levels of correlation are achieved between student achievement scores and classroom processes, the intricacies of which are beyond the scope of this paper (see Brophy & Good, 1986; Walberg, 1990; Creemers, 1994). One general conclusion, however, stands out “The most consistently replicated findings link achievement to the quantity and pacing of instruction” (Brophy & Good, 1986: 360). It is naive to assume, however, that the amount of time spent teaching is in itself a sufficient condition for student achievement. The literature on teaching effects is replete with descriptions of the myriad behaviours necessary for effective teaching. Many of these fall within the category that I would term ‘tactics for classroom management’. These are the basic skills that teachers use on a day-to-day basis to maintain classroom control and to ensure an orderly environment for learning. They provide the necessary but not the sufficient condition for powerful teaching. This is the territory that the OFSTED criteria for effective teaching largely focus on, as does the TTA’s somewhat technocratic approach to teaching competencies and standards.

*Teaching relationships.* There are another set of factors that characterise quality teaching; they are less technical and are more related to the teacher's commitment to her students and belief in the power of high expectations. For me this aspect of teaching lies in the teacher's ability to generate and sustain an authentic relationship with her students. For example, the teacher 'who made a difference' is a common topic of conversation following one's admission that 'I am a teacher'. To many educators a prime indicator of the 'effective' school is one in which a high proportion of pupils 'have a good or "vital" relationship with one or more teachers'. Indeed, this is one of John Gray's (1990) three key performance indicators for schools.

*Teaching models.* Despite the impressive gains associated in the research literature on the range of teaching skills described above, they can in no way be regarded as a panacea. There is a further and equally strong body of research and practice that suggests that student achievement can be further enhanced by the consistent and strategic use of specific teaching models (Joyce & Weil, 1996; Joyce, Calhoun & Hopkins, 1997). As Joyce and Weil (1996) point out, there are many powerful models of teaching – each with their own 'syntax', phases and guidelines – that are designed to bring about particular kinds of learning and to help students become more effective learners. As was implied earlier, models of teaching are really models of learning. As students acquire information, ideas, skills, values, ways of thinking, and means of expressing themselves, they are also learning how to learn. In fact, the most important long-term outcome of instruction may be the students' increased capabilities to learn more easily and effectively in the future both because of the knowledge and skill they have acquired, and because they have mastered a range of learning processes. How teaching is conducted has a large impact on students' abilities to educate themselves.

In *Models of Learning – Tools for Teaching* (Joyce, Calhoun & Hopkins, 1997) for example, we describe, with examples, eight contrasting and complementary teaching strategies drawn from Joyce's original four families of teaching models, namely the information-processing, the social, the personal, and the behavioral families. The 'toolbox' we outline in the book contains a selection of the models of teaching (actually models for learning) that simultaneously define the nature of the content, the learning strategies and the arrangements for social interaction that create the learning environments of our students. For example, in powerful classrooms students learn models for:

- extracting information and ideas from lectures and presentations

- memorising information
- building hypotheses and theories
- attaining concepts and how to invent them
- using metaphors to think creatively
- working effectively with others to initiate and carry out cooperative tasks.

When these models and strategies are combined, they have even greater potential for improving student learning. Thus imagine a classroom where the learning environment contains a variety of models of teaching that are not only intended to accomplish a range of curriculum goals, but are also designed to help students increase their competence as learners. In such classrooms the students learn models for memorising information, how to attain concepts and how to invent them. They practice building hypotheses and theories and use the tools of science to test them. They learn how to extract information and ideas from lectures and presentations, how to study social issues and how to analyse their own social values. These students also know how to profit from training and how to train themselves in athletics, performing arts, mathematics and social skills. They know how to make their writing and problem solving more lucid and creative. Perhaps most importantly, they know how to take initiative in planning personal study, and they know how to work with others to initiate and carry out cooperative tasks. As students master information and skills, the result of each learning experience is not only the content they learn but also the greater ability they acquire to approach future learning tasks and to create learning environments for themselves.

These three perspectives on high quality teaching are not exclusive, although it may be that critical systematic reflection is a necessary condition for quality teaching. This is not reflection for reflection's sake, but in order to continue to develop a mastery of one's chosen craft. There are no ceilings to the performance of quality teachers. A few years ago I undertook for the OECD a comparative study of policies aimed at improving teacher quality (Hopkins & Stern, 1996). The key characteristics of high quality teachers highlighted by the study are: commitment, love of children, mastery of subject didactics and multiple models of teaching, the ability to collaborate with other teachers, and a capacity for reflection. Although it is convenient to group teachers' desired capacities and behaviors into categories, these attributes all interact in practice. For example, one French teacher elegantly defined teacher quality as '*savoirs, savior-faire, et savoir-être*' (Hopkins & Stern, 1996: 503); this is translatable perhaps as 'knowledge, knowing how to do, and knowing how to be'. It is this capacity that defines high quality teachers.

Although I believe that the evidence from research on teaching can help teachers in creating increasingly effective learning environments for students, such research and strategies should not be regarded as panaceas to be followed slavishly. Research knowledge and the various specifications of teaching can have many limitations, especially if they are adopted uncritically. Such knowledge only becomes useful when it is subjected to the discipline of practice through the exercise of the teacher's professional judgement. For, as Lawrence Stenhouse (1975: 142) said in a slightly different context, such proposals are not to be regarded 'as an unqualified recommendation, but rather as a provisional specification claiming no more than to be worth putting to the test of practice. Such proposals claim to be intelligent rather than correct'.

Outstanding teachers take individual and collective responsibility to base their teaching on the best knowledge and practice available. But they then take those ideas and strategies and critically reflect on them through practice in their own and each other's classrooms. It is through reflection that the teacher harmonises, integrates and transcends the necessary classroom management skills, the acquisition of a repertoire of models of teaching, and the personal aspects of her teaching into a strategy that has meaning for her students. These teachers also understand that teaching strategies only become tools for learning within a curriculum context. Teaching strategies that impact positively on learning are not 'free floating' but assume their power through being integrated with appropriate curriculum content. As Bruner so presciently noted, the appropriate teaching strategy needs to be selected after careful consideration of both the learning needs of the students and the knowledge to be acquired.

To summarise briefly, powerful teaching reflects the teacher's ability to create powerful learning experiences for her students. The achievement of this aim is, however, severely inhibited in many settings by the lack of both a sufficiently sophisticated language and coherent frameworks within which to consider teaching. I have outlined the scaffolding for one way of reflecting on teaching that can contribute to powerful learning. Successful teachers are not simply charismatic, persuasive, and expert presenters; rather, they present powerful cognitive and social tasks to their students and teach the students how to make productive use of them. However important this all is, it still ignores Lawrence Downey's memorable dictum that 'A school teaches in three ways; by what it teaches, by how it teaches, and by the kind of place it is'. I shall consider in the following section the kind of place a powerful school is.

## POWERFUL SCHOOLS

The learning and teaching engagements described in the previous section are commonplace in schools that have a culture characterised by high expectations, collaboration and innovation. Effective schools throughout the world – those schools whose students progress further and faster than one would expect on the basis of their prior learning histories – share very similar characteristics. The research on effective schools (for a comprehensive review see for example Reynolds & Cuttance, 1992), confirms the importance in any improvement effort of ensuring strong links between the learning environment for the student, teacher behavior in the classroom, and the organizational dynamics of the school. It is, however, more than just ensuring a link between the classroom and school in a development plan, for example. Unless one can define the school's 'capacity for development' in operational terms and develop strategies for enhancing it, then the prospect of creating and sustaining powerful learning experiences for students into the medium term will be greatly impeded.

The effort to understand the relationship between student learning, classroom practice and school organization has occurred within the context of our collaborative school improvement project known as *Improving the Quality of Education for All (IQEA)*. The IQEA research has demonstrated that without an equal focus on the development capacity, or internal conditions of the school, innovative work quickly becomes marginalised. From our experience within the IQEA project we have begun to associate a number of 'conditions' in the school with their capacity for sustained improvement. Conditions are the internal features of the school – the 'arrangements' that enable it to get work done. They have to be worked on at the same time as the curriculum or other priorities the school has set itself. These provide us with a working definition of the development capacity of the 'powerful school'.

At present, our best estimate of those conditions that underpin school improvement efforts, and so therefore represent the key management arrangements, can be broadly stated as:

- a commitment to *staff development*
- practical efforts to ensure the *involvement* of staff, students and the community in school policies and decisions
- 'transformational' *leadership* approaches
- effective *coordination* strategies
- proper attention to the potential benefits of *enquiry* and *reflection*
- a commitment to *collaborative planning* activity.

We have elaborated these conditions at both the school and classroom level at length elsewhere (Ainscow, Hopkins, Southworth & West, 1994; Hopkins, Ainscow & West, 1994; Hopkins, West & Ainscow, 1996; Hopkins, West, Harris, Ainscow & Beresford, 1997; Hopkins, West & Beresford, 1998), and in our own work we encourage schools to work on them simultaneously. We have also outlined a series of propositions about the relationship between the way a school approaches a particular condition and the impact of that condition on the school's development capacity both at the classroom and school levels (Hopkins & West, 1994: 192–193). The propositions creating the conditions for school improvement are summarised below:

**Proposition 1**

Schools will not improve unless teachers, individually and collectively, develop. While teachers can often develop their practice on an individual basis, if the whole school is to develop then there needs to be many *staff development* opportunities for teachers to learn together.

**Proposition 2**

Successful schools seem to have ways of working that encourage feelings of *involvement* from a number of stakeholder groups, especially students.

**Proposition 3**

Schools that are successful at development establish a clear vision for themselves and regard leadership as a function to which many staff contribute, rather than a set of responsibilities vested in a single individual.

**Proposition 4**

The *coordination* of activities is an important way of keeping people involved, particularly when changes of policy are being introduced. Communication within the school is an important aspect of coordination, as are the information interactions that arise between teachers.

**Proposition 5**

We have observed that those schools which recognise that *enquiry* and *reflection* are important processes in school improvement find it easier to gain clarity and establish shared meanings around identified development priorities, and are better placed to monitor the extent to which policies actually deliver the intended outcomes for pupils.

**Proposition 6**

Our experience alongside that of colleagues in IQEA schools suggests that through the *process of planning for development* the school is able to link its educational aspirations to identifiable priorities,

sequence those priorities over time, and maintain a focus on classroom practice.

It is important to note that our elaboration through research and practice of the concept of the 'conditions for school improvement' provides a working definition of the powerful school. It should also be stressed that in any school improvement effort the conditions and the school's priority for development should be worked on simultaneously. We have, however, noted in the IQEA project that in schools where circumstances exist that are less supportive of change, it is necessary to concentrate initially on creating those internal conditions within the school that facilitate development. Work on the priorities may be limited until the conditions are in place.

One way of understanding the relationship between the conditions and the school's developmental priorities – or, in the terms of this paper, the link between powerful teaching and powerful schools – is to consider Joyce's analysis of the characteristics of effective large scale school improvement initiatives (Joyce, Wolf & Calhoun, 1993: 72). Typically, such initiatives:

- focus on specific outcomes which can be related to student learning, rather than adopt laudable but non-specific goals such as 'improve exam results';
- draw on theory, research into practice and the teachers' own experience in formulating strategies, so that a rationale for the required changes is established in the minds of those expected to bring them about;
- target staff development, since it is unlikely that developments in student learning will occur without developments in teachers' practice;
- monitor the impact of policy on practice early and regularly, rather than rely on *post-hoc* evaluation.

These characteristics are highly consistent with the IQEA framework for school improvement (Hopkins, West & Ainscow, 1996). They also link closely with the theme of this paper. They illustrate how powerful learning (the first point), is contingent on powerful teaching (the second point), which is set within the context of the organisational conditions of the powerful school (the final two points). This marriage is a vital component of sustainable improvement efforts.

## A FRAMEWORK FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

I have in this paper been establishing a framework for school improvement that builds explicitly on enhancing the learning experiences, achievement and progress of pupils. One way of expressing the argument of this paper and the context of school improvement is found in Figure 1. In the centre of the series of concentric rings is powerful learning – the achievement and progress of students. The next ring is comprised of the essential ingredients of powerful teaching – the ‘holy trinity’ of teaching strategy, curriculum content and the learning needs of students. Powerful learning and powerful teaching are found in powerful schools; that is schools that have organisational conditions supportive of high levels of teaching and learning. Some of the key elements of these conditions are found in the next ring – collaborative planning that focuses on student outcomes (e.g. Hargreaves & Hopkins, 1991; Hopkins & MacGilchrist, 1998), staff development that is committed to the improvement of classroom practice (e.g. Joyce & Showers, 1995), regular enquiry and reflection (e.g. Hopkins, 1993), and the involvement of students in their own learning (e.g. Rudduck et al., 1996). All of this activity takes place within, of course, the context of the national reform agenda – the outer ring. When all the rings are pulling in the same direction, then powerful learning is likely to be the result. All need to exist in a reciprocal relationship if student achievement is to be enhanced.

I have said very little so far about the outer ring, national educational policy. Two observations are however worth making. First, when deciding on policy options it is better, at least in terms of student achievement, to work, as I have done in this paper, from the centre of the circle out. This will help ensure that policy is based on coherent educational argument rather than populist political ideology. Second, there is no evidence in any Western educational system that centralised policy, in Milbrey McLaughlin’s (1990: 12) felicitous phrase, ‘mandates what matters’. It is local implementation that determines student outcomes; centralised policy can at best set a direction, a framework for action. Nor should we be surprised or regret that it can do no more.

If this analysis is correct – and it will take much to persuade me that it is not – then I draw two implications from it for policy-makers. The first is that it is imperative that the appropriate policy options are chosen, and that they relate to an educational rather than a political agenda. I have no problem with centralised change per se; my concern is with the presumption that centralised change will in fact improve student outcomes. The second implication, and this relates specifically to the enhancing of student achievement, is that policy-makers need to pay far more attention to the

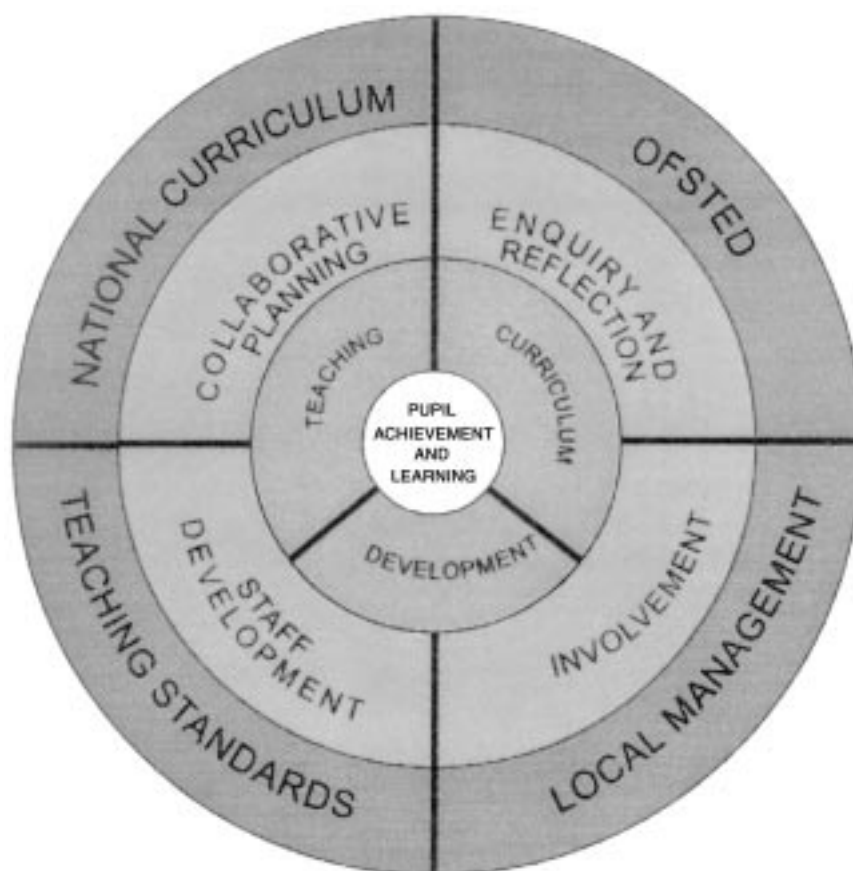


Figure 1. The circles of school improvement.

‘links in the chain’ – to the implementation, rather than the articulation, of policy at school and classroom levels.

It is around the issue of implementation that the success of school improvement efforts revolves. Evidence of good practice and the lessons of research suggest that school improvement strategies need to focus both on how to accelerate the progress and enhance the achievement of students as well as establishing effective management practices within the school. This approach is neither top-down – focussed in the main on management arrangements; nor bottom-up – committed to specific changes in individual classrooms; but, a combination of the two. Yet most school improvement strategies, it seems, tend to focus on either one or the other (Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan & Hopkins, 1998). It is this that explains why many

school improvement strategies are insufficiently robust and inconclusive and so fail to enhance pupil progress and achievement.

The balance between focussing on management arrangements and classroom conditions within school improvement strategies leads to a further point concerning the importance of employing differential school improvement strategies. Some schools' performance is outstanding over a period of time, others less so (Gray et al., 1999). It is therefore sensible to assume that a strategy for moving a school from a low level of performance to average performance would be qualitatively different from a strategy designed to move a school from average to excellent performance. A strategy that helps to keep a school at an excellent level of performance is likely to be different again. These strategies could be called Type I, Type II, Type III. In some larger schools, these distinctions and strategies may well also apply to key stage teams or departments.

**Type I** strategies are those that assist low performing schools become moderately effective. They need to involve a high level of external support because such schools have difficulty in improving themselves. These strategies often involve a clear and direct focus on a limited number of achievable pupil learning objectives in order to build the confidence and competence to continue.

**Type II** strategies are those that assist moderately effective schools to become more effective. These schools usually need to refine their development priorities to focus on specific teaching and learning issues and improve the management arrangements within the school to support this work. These strategies often involve a certain level of external support, but some schools in this type 'improve' by themselves.

**Type III** strategies are those that assist highly effective schools to remain so. External support although often welcomed is not always necessary as these schools usually search out and create their own support networks. Exposure to new ideas and practices, an open discussion of values, collaboration within the school through partnership teaching and outside the school through consortia arrangements, seem to be common in these situations.

So to summarise this phase of the discussion, much school improvement work assumes that in practice all schools are the same – that a strategy such as development planning will work as well in one school as another. I have argued here that if policy is to positively effect practice the school improvement strategy needs to reflect a blending of focus between management arrangements and classroom level conditions (Hopkins, West & Ainscow, 1996). In addition, schools at different levels of effective-

ness require different school improvement strategies (Hopkins, Harris & Jackson, 1997). Put simply, schools at different stages of development require different strategies not only to enhance their capacity for development, but also to provide a more effective education for their students. Strategies for school development need to fit the 'Growth State' or culture of the particular school.

It is experience and research such as this that provides the most positive critique of current centralised policies. There is no doubt that most governments are committed to the aspirations of school improvement. What is often lacking is a considered conceptual framework in which to drive forward and deliver the educational agenda. Most national authorities identify targets for achievement in key learning areas; having done this, they need also to address four further key issues (Slavin & Fashola, 1998). They are:

- Government and other educational agencies should be developing and piloting curriculum *and* instructional programmes that directly address in implementable ways the targets that are being set.
- If this is achieved – a range of policy options related to programmes that *really* work – then schools could begin to select from among a range of options those strategies that address the particular targets they have set, the learning needs of their students, and the particular stage of development the school is in.
- With a series of programme options available schools are then in a position to address more directly the crucial issues of staff development and consistency of implementation that are so necessary for ensuring student achievement.
- This would make it easier for governments and other agencies to target funding to those schools in the greatest need in the far more secure knowledge that what they were going to do would achieve the goals the system as a whole had set itself.

In order to ensure that school improvement strategies do reach the level of the classroom, a range of carefully selected curriculum and instructional strategies need to be produced that meet the particular development goals of schools. They then have to be consistently implemented. Further there will also be the need to focus not just on how innovations impact on schools, but on how such innovations can move up to scale and impact on many schools and systems. As I have argued in this paper, without such an approach to school improvement, the evidence of practice and research clearly suggests that society will continue to set educational goals that are, on current performance, beyond the capacity of the system to deliver.

## CODA: THE MORAL PURPOSE OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Let me conclude this personal reflection on school improvement by saying a word about the moral purpose. There is a striking quality about fine teachers – they care deeply about their students. A key characteristic of those outstanding teachers in our OECD study was their ‘love of children’ (Hopkins & Stern, 1996). Most teachers came into teaching because they wanted to make a difference. It may well be that for various reasons, many of which may be to do with the context within which teachers currently work, a degree of cynicism and weariness may dull this initial enthusiasm. But as Michael Fullan commented in *Change Forces* (1993) ‘scratch a good teacher and you find a moral purpose’.

It is much easier for individual teachers to express their ‘moral purpose’ when the institutional climate of the universities and schools in which they train and work espouse and articulate a set of coherent educational values. I do not wish to sound pious, but high quality teachers are committed to the learning of students, so too are outstanding schools. Our research on improving and exemplary schools suggests that they are characterised by a passion for learning; and that they consistently articulate the values on which their curriculum, organisation and teaching methods are based (Gray et al., 1999). In the sense that I mean it here, moral purpose is not ‘wishy-washy’ idealism, but a ruthless and relentless commitment to the learning of children at both an individual and institutional level. An unending quest for the highest of standards, a low tolerance of failure, and a commitment to student learning is the moral purpose that I see in the outstanding teachers and schools I am privileged to meet and visit. It is this, as Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) have so evocatively argued, that gives the impetus for school improvement: not just in the first place, but it also provides the determination to continue on the journey.

Ultimately it comes down to a question of *will*. This perhaps is the real next horizon. As I search for a conclusion, Ron Edmonds’s (1979: 22–23) evocative question returns to haunt me: ‘How many effective schools would you have to see to be persuaded of the educability of all children?’ He then continued to answer his own question: ‘we already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it, must depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far’.

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