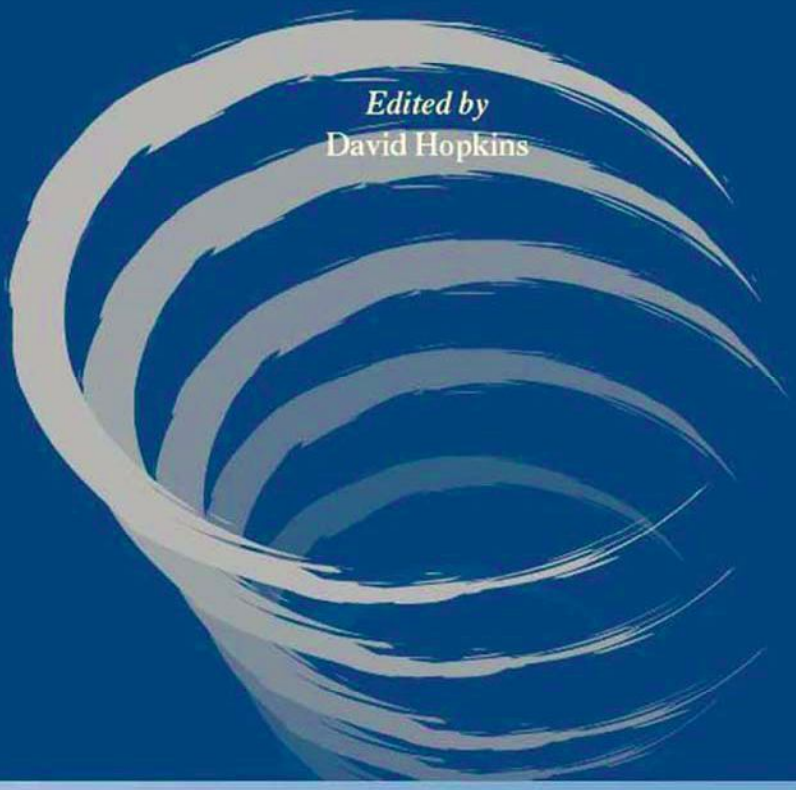
THE PRACTICE AND THEORY OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

International Handbook of Educational Change



Edited by
David Hopkins

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The Table of Contents of the entire *International Handbook of Educational Change* has been printed at the end of this volume.

The Practice and Theory of School Improvement

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International Handbook of Educational Change - Introduction

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This set of four volumes on *Educational Change* brings together evidence and insights on educational change issues from leading writers and researchers in the field from across the world. Many of these writers, whose chapters have been specially written for these books, have been investigating, helping initiate and implementing educational change, for most or all of their lengthy careers. Others are working on the cutting edge of theory and practice in educational change, taking the field in new or even more challenging directions. And some are more skeptical about the literature of educational change and the assumptions on which it rests. They help us to approach projects of understanding or initiating educational change more deeply, reflectively and realistically.

Educational change and reform have rarely had so much prominence within public policy, in so many different places. Educational change is ubiquitous. It figures large in Presidential and Prime Ministerial speeches. It is at or near the top of many National policy agendas. Everywhere, educational change is not only a policy priority but also major public news. Yet action to bring about educational change usually exceeds people's understanding of how to do so effectively.

The sheer number and range of changes which schools are now confronting is staggering.

Educators have always had to engage with educational changes of one sort or another. But other than in the last three decades or so, these changes were infrequent and episodic and they never really affected or even addressed the core of how teachers taught (Cuban, 1984). The changes were in things like how subjects were organized, how grade levels were clustered together into different school types, or how groups of students were divided between different schools or integrated within them according to ability, gender or race. Thus when educational

D. Hopkins (ed.), The Practice and Theory of School Improvement, vii-xi.

historians chastise contemporary change advocates for ignoring the existence of educational change in the past and for exaggerating current crises and change demands "as a marketing device to promote the new possibilities of education in a new century, designed to appeal to consumers of different kinds who are grown weary of the old familiar product" (McCulloch, 1997), they are only partially right. While educational change has always been with us in some sense or other (as also, of course, has educational continuity), many of the changes are very different now, in both their substance and their form.

Since the 1960s, educational change has became a familiar part of teachers' work, and has more directly addressed issues of what teachers teach and how they should teach it. Following the launch of Sputnik and the emergence of post-war egalitarian ideals, public education has been treated as a crucible of technological and economic advancement and as a creator of greater social justice. In the 1960s and 70s, teachers in many countries had to deal with the rhetoric and sometimes the reality of curriculum innovation in mathematics, science and the humanities. They saw students stay in school longer, the ability ranges of their classes grow wider and the walls of their classrooms come down and then go up again just a few years later. Successive waves of different approaches to reading or mathematical learning swept through their classrooms, each one washing away the marks left by its predecessors.

It was in these times of educational expansion and optimism that educational change really began in earnest - as also did the study of it. From the late 1960s and early 1970s, researchers like Matt Miles, Per Dalin, Lou Smith, Neil Gross, Lawrence Stenhouse and Seymour Sarason studied the growing phenomenon of educational innovation - whether in the shape of large-scale curriculum projects and packages, or in the form of newly-created innovative schools. They showed how and why large-scale curriculum innovations rarely progressed beyond the phase of having their packages purchased or "adopted" to the point where they were implemented fully and faithfully, and could bring about real changes in classroom practice. At the same time, they also revealed how the promise of exceptional innovative schools usually faded over time as their staffs grew older, their charismatic leaders left, and the system withdrew permission for them to break the rules.

As the limitations of large-scale curriculum innovations became apparent, educators began to treat the individual school as the centre or focal point of educational change efforts. School-based curriculum development, and school-based staff development initiatives proliferated in many places, instead of development being imposed or initiated from faraway.

Research on what made teachers effective in their classrooms also expanded to address what made schools effective or ineffective as a whole, and as lists of effective schools characteristics were discovered (such as creating a safe and orderly environment for learning, or setting and checking homework regularly), these were sometimes then used as administrative blueprints to try and make particular schools

become more effective over time. Many districts or other administrative authorities initiated "effective schools" projects on this basis. Some schools and districts supplemented and sometimes supplanted this science of school effectiveness with a more loosely defined and humanistically interpreted art of school improvement - the process of how to help schools and their staffs become more effective through setting clear goals, creating staff involvement, measuring progress over time and so forth.

Ironically, this approach to school improvement was then translated back into a rational science by many educational systems. It was treated as a process of planned or managed change that schools could be moved through step-by-step, stage-by-stage, guided by the school's improvement team that its region or district mandated it to have.

When these various school-centred changes and improvements didn't work well enough or fast enough (and sometimes even when they did), impatient educational administrators (and American urban school superintendents with an average job tenure of less than two years can be very impatient indeed), imposed their own reform requirements instead. So too did ideologically driven politicians, whose agendas of educational reform have often been shaped by the desire to create public indignation (which they promise their measures will then answer), or by the private idiosyncrasies of their own educational pasts, (which their reforms are meant to cherish or purge).

This quarter century or more of educational change processes and initiatives that have been meant to alter learning and teaching in our schools, has left us with a mixed legacy. On the one hand, studies of what works and what doesn't across all the different change strategies have created a truly powerful knowledge base about the processes, practices and consequences of educational change. During this period, research studies have shown, for example, how educational change moves through distinctive stages of initiation, implementation and institutionalization; how people who encounter changes go through successive "stages of concern" about how those changes will affect them; and how people respond very differently to educational change initiatives depending on what point they have reached in their own lives and careers.

Some of the research findings on educational change have even been accorded the status of generalizable rules or `lessons' of change. These include the maxims that practice changes before beliefs, that successful change is a product of both pressure and support, that evolutionary planning works better than linear planning and so forth (these `lessons' have been synthesized especially effectively by Michael Fullan, 1991, 1993).

So extensive is the current knowledge base of educational change that it has come to constitute a field of study in its own right - drawing on and transcending the disciplines of sociology, psychology, history and philosophy, as well as the fields of curriculum and educational administration. In a way, educational change has now really come of age - but while this is a significant academic achievement, it is also where the problems of the field - the second part of its legacy - also begin.

Our experience of educational change today is stretching far beyond our experience, knowledge and investigations of it in times gone by. While the existing

knowledge-base of educational change is impressive, it is no longer really sufficient to address the unique change problems and challenges that educators confront today.

Contemporary patterns of educational change present educators with changes that are multiple, complex and sometimes contradictory. And the change demands with which educators have to deal, seem to follow one another at an increasingly frenetic speed. A typical primary or elementary school these days may be considering a new reading program, developing cooperative learning strategies, thinking about how to implement new computers, designing a better parent newsletter, and trialling portfolio assessments all at the same time. The portfolio assessments favoured by the region or the district may have to be reconciled with imposed standardized test requirements by the nation or the state. A push to develop a more integrated curriculum and to recognize children's multiple intelligences may be reversed by a newly elected government's commitments to more conventionally defined learning standards within existing academic subjects.

All this can make teachers and administrators feel that the systems in which they are working aren't just complex but downright chaotic. This chaos is partly inherent in societies and organizations where information circulates and decisions are made with increasing speed. It is also the result of educational policy constantly being shaped and altered by different and competing interest groups in an ideological battle for the minds of the young. And sometimes it even results from a kind of *manufactured uncertainty* that more than a few governments wilfully create to arouse panic, to set pretexts for their policy interventions and to keep educators and everyone else off-balance.

Few of the existing theories and strategies of educational change equip educators to cope effectively with these complex, chaotic and contradictory environments

- Rational theories of planned change that move through predictable stages of implementation or `growth' are poorly suited to schools where unexpected twists and turns are the norm rather than the exception in the ways they operate.
- The conventional academic and behavioural outcomes that defined the core of what an effective school should produce in the past are outdated in an age where many people now clamour for schools to develop higher-order thinking skills, problem-solving capacities, and the habits of collaboration and teamwork. Complex as the world of education is, people expect more and more from it, and the effective schools of the past cannot deliver what many expect of schools today.
- Theories and models that helped educators know how (and how not) to implement single curriculum innovations are of little use to schools where innovations are multiple and priorities compete.

While we have learned a lot about how to improve individual schools or small clusters of schools with additional resources, exceptional leaders, the ability to attract or shed particular kinds of staff members, and discretion to break the

> rules; we are only just beginning to understand the challenges of scaling reform up from small samples of improving schools, to entire school systems. The existing knowledge base of school improvement has shown us how to create islands of improvement, but has been less helpful in assisting people to make archipelagoes from islands, and still less in showing them how to build entire continents of change.

It is time, therefore, to reflect at some length about what we already know and have learned about educational change and to explore how the field can and should be pushed further, to help educators understand and deal effectively with the immensely complex change problems that are customary today. Each of the four volumes on *Educational Change* addresses these fundamental issues in its own distinctive way.

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Introduction

Tensions in and Prospects for School Improvement

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The purpose of this volume of the International Handbook is to review current theories of school development, the evolution of school improvement as a strategy of educational change over the past 30 years, and to critique current theories of development and strategies for growth from a variety of different national contexts. In this introductory chapter the editor outlines the historical development and definitions of school improvement as a strategy for educational change, surveys school improvement practice, assesses the differential impact of school improvement strategies and their links to student achievement and provides an overview of the volume.

Those of us who spend much of our professional lives labouring in that part of the Educational Change vineyard known as "school improvement" have recently been celebrating. For decades now we have been the poor relations of the field, tolerated, talked to at parties, but not really regarded as being 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. 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. The phrase "school improvement" is now an established part of the educational lexicon; it features in governmental policy, university professors become expert in it, educational conferences focus on it, and even schools are becoming familiar with the rhetoric surrounding it.

The emergence of school improvement from the shadows is to many of us however a mixed blessing. As with any new idea, much is expected of it, particularly from politicians desperately seeking for simple solutions to complex problems. 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, and that the challenge of enhancing student achievement requires a purposeful and strategic response. Many of the educational initiatives that have been recently spawned under the school improvement umbrella are 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 have changed by themselves decades ago. Blaming teachers and delegating financial

D. Hopkins (ed.), The Practice and Theory of School Improvement, 1-21.

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. Successful school improvement projects, such as Robert Slavin's "Success For All" literacy programme for elementary age students, involve not simply the introduction of a well designed curriculum and instructional programme, but also a virtual redesign of the school to focus on student learning (Slavin et al., 1996).

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 with the trend in most Western countries of decentralising the responsibility for the implementation of educational reform, whilst at the same time decreasing the level of support to schools from external agencies. Alongside this increase in political pressure for institutional renewal, there has been a steady realisation that traditional 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 (Fullan & Miles, 1992).

It is against this background that contemporary approaches to school improvement need to be examined. In exploring the tensions in and prospects for school improvement, this volume of the International Handbook of Educational Change harnesses the perspectives of – in section one, theory and research; in section two, contemporary national policy contexts; in section three, a range of school improvement strategies; and in section four, contemporary research and evaluations of school improvement approaches – to help chart a way forward. The purpose of this editorial introduction is to:

- provide a robust and accessible definition of school improvement
- describe the three sources of school improvement theory and practice
- survey contemporary school improvement practice
- locate the contents of this volume within this context and raise a series of key issues for school improvement as we move into a new century.

DEFINING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

There are two senses in which the phrase *school improvement* is generally used. The first is the common sense meaning which relates to general efforts to make schools better places for pupils and students to learn. This is a sensible interpretation of the phrase and its most common usage. In this volume of the International Handbook however, I am principally concerned with a second more technical or specific way in which the phrase is used. In this sense school improvement is a distinct approach to educational change that enhances student outcomes *as well*

as strengthening the school's capacity for managing change. School improvement is about raising student achievement through focusing on the teaching – learning process and the conditions which support it. It is about strategies for improving the schools capacity for providing quality education in times of change. It is not about blindly accepting the edicts of a centralised policies, and striving to implement these directives uncritically. But even this more specific definition is open to differing interpretations (see Hopkins et al., 1994, Chapter 1).

Roland Barth (1990) in his book *Improving Schools from Within*, distinguishes between two different approaches to school improvement that rest on sets of very different assumptions. He describes the dominant approach as being predicated on a set of assumptions that has led to an approach to school reform that is based on a proliferation of 'lists'. There are lists of the characteristics of the 'effective' school, teacher, and pupil, lists of minimum competencies, lists of regulations, performance indicators and so on. What is dangerous and self defeating about this view of the world is the mind set that informs it. Inherent in the approach is a set of assumptions about people, how they feel, how they should behave and about how organisations work. It is an approach that encourages someone to do something to someone else: it is about control rather than growth. The argument is less against lists than the values that inform them. Lists can be helpful when they are used to inform action; but even then, they need to be negotiated and subject to the teacher's (or school's) judgement.

Barth then argues for basing school reform on the skills, aspirations and energy of those closest to the school: teachers, senior management, governors and parents. He argues that a such a 'community of learners' approach school improvement from a radically different set of assumptions than those of the list makers. These assumptions are (Barth, 1990, p. 45 *my italics*):

- Schools have the capacity to improve themselves, if the *conditions* are right. A major responsibility of those outside the school is to help provide these conditions for those inside.
- When the need and purpose is there, when the conditions are right, adults and students alike learn and each energises and contributes to the learning of the other.
- What needs to be improved about schools is their *culture*, the quality of interpersonal relationships, and the nature and quality of learning experiences.
- School improvement is an effort to determine and provide, from without and within, conditions under which the adults and youngsters who inhabit schools will promote and sustain learning among themselves.

These assumptions neatly capture the essence of the approach to school improvement taken in this volume of the International Handbook. Barth's assumptions lead to some liberating ways of thinking about change. Schools, and those who live out their daily lives within them, are no longer the "victims" of change, but can take more control of the process. By using the opportunity of external change as a stimulus, and by taking advantage of external support and the evidence of

good practice and research, they can subject the specificities of change to their own professional scrutiny and judgement in the pursuit of enhanced learning for their students. As I hope will become clear in the pages that follow, these by and large are the values that are embodied in the approach to school improvement taken by the contributors to this volume of the International Handbook.

SOURCES OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

The aspiration to establish the appropriate contexts in which to enhance learning is as old as civilisation itself. Constraints of both space and scholarship however preclude such a discussion here. Ironically, it is also surprising to realise, as Fullan (1991, p. 5) has also pointed out, how short is the history of serious investigation into the change process and improvement in schools. I will therefore confine myself to some comments on what I see to be the three main contributors to current approaches to school improvement. As brief as such a discussion will be, I believe that it is necessary in order to fully understand the tensions in and prospects for contemporary school improvement. The three sources of contemporary school improvement reflect innovations and strategies that focus on:

- curriculum and instruction
- organisation development
- decentralisation of decision making.

The tensions inherent in contemporary school improvement is that advocates of each of these domains regard them as being sufficient in themselves, which they patently are not. The prospect for school improvement is the synergy created by their integration. This is the theme that will be pursued in various guises throughout the remainder of this introductory chapter.

Curriculum and Instruction

Many date the beginning of the modern period of educational reform back to the successful launch of Sputnik in the old USSR in October 1957. This signal achievement shattered the complacency of the American dream and heralded an unprecedented expenditure on education. This investment led to the "decade of curriculum reform" where from the mid 1960's onwards the major focus of innovation was on the *adoption of curriculum materials*. On both sides of the Atlantic the curriculum reform movement was intended to have a major impact on student achievement through the production and dissemination of exemplary curriculum materials.

Although the materials were often of high quality – being produced by teams of designers, academics and psychologists – in the main, they failed to have an impact on teaching. The reason in hindsight is obvious; teachers were not included in the

production process and the staff development that accompanied the new curricula was often perfunctory and rudimentary. Teachers, of course, got their own back. The imaginative educational archaeologist will to this day find partly rifled packs of curriculum materials among the cobwebs at the back of stock rooms and store cupboards. Teachers took what they thought was of use from the materials and integrated them into their own teaching. The curriculum as an innovation, however, was consequently subverted.

In Britain, the materials emanating from the Schools' Council in the late 60's (see Stenhouse, 1980, for a comprehensive account of these projects) experienced a similar fate. Although the Schools' Council curriculum projects involved teachers and some had attendant in-service schemes, they were still conceived within a 'top-down' or 'centre periphery' model of educational change. Few of these projects paid anything more than lip-service to the essential connection between teaching style and curriculum development (Hopkins, 1987a).

Three conclusions can be drawn from this brief analysis. The first is that to many, the principal agent for educational reform is the curriculum. This is still the dominant orthodoxy in many educational systems. Second, the failure of the curriculum reform movement to positively affect levels of student achievement is usually attributed to a failure in implementation. It became increasingly apparent that 'top-down' models of change did not work, that teachers required inservice training to acquire new knowledge and skills, and that implementation does not occur spontaneously as a result of legislative fiat. The third conclusion that was not entirely apparent at the time, is that a curriculum however good cannot impact directly on student learning. To affect learning, the curriculum as artefact has to be mediated through a process of instruction. As a number of the contributions to this volume will demonstrate, it is the ways in which teachers teach – create powerful contexts for learning – that lead to enhanced levels of student achievement.

Organisation Development

The second source of influence on contemporary school improvement practice is *organisation development* (OD). One can trace the development of organisation development back to the social psychological writings and practice of Kurt Lewin (1946) with his emphasis on the influence of the organisation on the behaviour of its members, and the popularisation of 'action research' as *the* research methodology for social action and emancipation (Hopkins 1994). In the sixties, it was Matthew Miles (1967) who among others advocated the adaptation of OD techniques to schools. Later, Miles' (1975) seminal paper on 'organisational health', and the publication of OD in Schools by Schmuck and Miles (1971) provided the first mature expression of the impact of OD in education. A decade later, in a 'State of the Art' paper, Fullan et al. (1980) concluded that OD in schools had 'diffused to a larger extent than we and others had realised'.

Of the various OD strategies described in the research literature survey or data

feedback is "the only treatment associated with substantial improvement" (Bowers 1973, p. 21). As Bowers (1973, p. 45) notes, "where the survey feedback is employed with skill and experience, it becomes a sophisticated tool for using the data as a springboard to development." When used in the educational context, most OD advocates suggested the use of a survey feedback, problem solving and collective decision making design. This approach aids goal clarification by giving information on what the staff of a school perceive as goals; its design improves information flow and communication, encourages adaptation, and creates a climate for consensual decision making; finally, the follow-through phase presents a model for problem solving that can be internalised and used as a resource in the future.

An example of a well developed approach to institutional self renewal based on OD techniques is found in the work of Richard Schmuck and Philip Runkel (1985). Schmuck (1984, p. 29) views the capacity for problem solving in a school to be constituted of a series of meta-skills – systematic diagnosis, searching for information and resources, mobilising collaborative action, 'synergy', and the staff's ability to evaluate effectiveness of the previous meta-skills. It is on such approaches to OD in schools that much of the process emphasis in school improvement interventions is based.

Three conclusions can also be drawn from this brief analysis. First, OD approaches emphasise the importance of a school's organisational health. Second and consequently, a major emphasis in many school improvement interventions is based on an approach that attempts to humanise the organisational context within which teachers and students live. Third, and possibly under emphasised at the time, was the empirical support given to the effectiveness of intervention strategies that diagnosed the internal conditions of the organisation as a precursor to development.

Decentralisation of Decision Making

The third source of influence concerns the amount of development expected of schools in most Western countries that has increased exponentially over the past decade or two. This increase in expectations has been accompanied on an international scale by fundamental changes in the ways schools are managed and governed. Most developed countries now face the contradictory pressures of centralisation and decentralisation i.e. increased government control over policy and direction versus more responsibility for implementation, resource management and evaluation at a local level. This tension has made the task of implementing school change both complex and challenging. The task of balancing centrally derived change and locally developed improvement has proved in practice most difficult.

A report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on decentralisation and school improvement outlined three principle reasons for such difficulties (OECD, 1989, p. 2):

- The decentralisation of decision making as part of school improvement establishes new roles and responsibilities for senior education officials at the centre and for school leaders, teachers and parents at the school level. As new roles are assumed, tensions inevitably develop. Approaches need to be put in place to respond to these tensions.
- Shifts of responsibility to the school raise the possibility that some functions, formerly carried out at the centre, will not be effectively performed. Central authorities need to ensure, through guidance and support for pre-service, in service and community based programmes, that those new roles have developed the capacity to meet their new responsibilities. External support for schools, re-orientated to meet specific school defined needs, must also be sustained (even if the services are no longer provided by central authorities).
- The management of change, whether at the centre or at the school level, requires a strategy which considers change as a dynamic and evolutionary process. Following from a clear vision of the expected results of change, the strategy should anticipate tensions and difficulties but also allow for adaptations and adjustments as the change proceeds.

This last point raises the important issue of selecting strategies for school change which allow for *adaptation and adjustment* within the change process. This implies that strategies for school improvement should be flexible enough to suit different school development and change needs. However, as a number of contributors to this volume emphasise, many school improvement interventions fail to recognise, or respond to, differential school development needs.

The three conclusions to be drawn from this brief analysis are: the general response to the increase in the amount of change expected of schools is a widespread policy of decentralisation; second and consequently, the self renewing school and the strategies for achieving it, has become a major focus of school improvement efforts; and third, a failure to recognise that simply changing bureaucratic procedures or holding people more accountable *does not by itself* improve the quality of education for students.

Although it may be helpful conceptually and strategically to think of these three sources of school improvement as distinct, they need to coalesce in order to impact on student learning. Unfortunately, as we shall see in later chapters, many school improvement policies and practices tend to emphasise one at the expense of the others. This myopia stands in contrast to the research base, and the evidence of effective school improvement strategies developed in the mid eighties and early nineties. It is to these perspectives that we turn in the following section.

Contemporary Perspectives on School Improvement

At the level of strategy and research, rather than policy and practice, attempts were made during the eighties and early nineties by individuals and groups to generate synergy between the three sources of school improvement noted above. A major

impetus to the development of school improvement as a strategic response to the challenge of educational change was given by the OECD through its Centre for Educational research and development (CERI), who between 1982 and 1986 sponsored an International School Improvement Project (ISIP). ISIP built on previous OECD/CERI initiatives such as The Creativity of the School (Nisbet 1973) and the INSET (Hopkins, 1986) projects. At a time when the educational system as a whole faced not only retrenchment but also pressure for change, a project that focused on school improvement – at change at the meso level, at strategies for strengthening the school's capacity for problem solving, at making the school more reflexive to change, as well as enhancing the teaching/learning process – was seen as both important and necessary.

ISIP proposed a very different way of thinking about change than the ubiquitous 'top-down' approach. When the school is regarded as the 'centre' of change, then strategies for change need to take this new perspective into account. Although there is no space to discuss the knowledge that emanated from ISIP in detail (van Velzen, 1985; Hopkins, 1987b, 1990), a few of the perspectives adopted by the project are worth commenting on. School Improvement for example, was defined in the ISIP as (van Velzen et al., 1985, p. 48):

- a systematic, sustained effort aimed at change in learning conditions and other related internal conditions in one or more schools, with the ultimate aim of accomplishing educational goals more effectively.

School improvement as an approach to educational change according to ISIP therefore rested on a number of assumptions (Hopkins et al., 1994, p. 69):

- *the school as the centre of change.* This means that external reforms need to be sensitive to the situation in individual schools, rather than assuming that all schools are the same. It also implies that school improvement efforts need to adopt a 'classroom-exceeding' perspective, without ignoring the classroom.
- *a systematic approach to change.* School improvement is a carefully planned and managed process that takes place over a period of several years.
- *a key focus for change are the 'internal conditions' of schools.* These include not only the teaching-learning activities used in the school, but also the schools' procedures, role allocation and resource use that support the teaching learning process.
- *accomplishing educational goals more effectively.* Educational goals reflect the particular mission of a school, and represent what the school itself regards as desirable. This suggests a broader definition of outcome than student scores on achievement tests, even though for some schools these may be pre-eminent. Schools also serve the more general developmental needs of students, the professional development of teachers and the needs of its community.
- *a multi-level perspective.* Although the school is the centre of change it does not act alone. The school is embedded in an educational system that has to work collaboratively, or symbiotically, if the highest degrees of quality are to be achieved. This means that the roles of teachers, heads, governors, parents,

support people (advisers, higher education, consultants etc.), and local authorities should be defined, harnessed and committed to the process of school improvement.

- *integrative implementation strategies.* This implies a linkage between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up'; remembering of course that both approaches can apply at a number of different levels in the system. Ideally 'top-down' provides – policy aims, an overall strategy and operational plans; this is complemented by a 'bottom-up' response involving – diagnosis, priority goal setting and implementation. The former provides the framework, resources and a menu of alternatives; the latter, energy and school based implementation.
- *the drive towards institutionalisation.* Change is only successful when it has become part of the natural behaviour of teachers in the school. Implementation by itself is not enough.

It is this philosophy and approach that underpinned the International School Improvement Project and laid the basis for further thinking and action. Many research studies occurred at around this time which further illuminated the school improvement approach to educational change within these basic parameters. The Rand study (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978) for example which was carried out in the mid seventies, has recently been reanalysed (McLaughlin, 1990). The DESSI study carried out in the early eighties (*e.g.* Crandall et al., 1982, 1986) was a similarly large scale attempt to understand the process of innovation. Karen Seashore Louis and Matthew Miles' (1990) study on Improving the Urban High School, and Miles' together with Michael Huberman's (1984) report on school improvement efforts in twelve American schools in their book *Innovation up Close*, provide more fine grained analyses of the process.

Other examples of this more organic approach are found in the various school improvement networks that are based on a particular philosophy, or set of principles. They are a sort of school improvement 'club' where the rules of admission define a generalised approach to development work in schools. The Comer School Development Programme (Comer et al., 1991); the Coalition of Essential Schools based at Brown University which has evolved on the basis of the ideas of Theodore Sizer (1989); and the League of Professional Schools at the University of Georgia led by Carl Glickman (1990), are all fine examples of this approach to school improvement. The 'Learning Consortium' in Toronto (Fullan et al., 1989), and the 'Improving the Quality of Education for All' (IQEA) project in England, are other well developed examples of this type (Hopkins et al., 1994, 1996).

Although all of these studies have increased knowledge about school improvement in general, evaluations of specific approaches to school improvement are still in short supply. This strategic dimension is however highly visible in Bruce Joyce's review of a series of individual approaches, which he describes as being 'doors' which can open or unlock the process of school improvement. Joyce concludes that each approach emphasises different aspects of school culture at the outset – in other words, they provide a range of ways of 'getting into' school

improvement. Each door opens a passageway into the culture of the school. His review reveals five major emphases (Joyce, 1991, p. 59):

1. *Collegiality*: the developing of collaborative and professional relations within a school staff and between their surrounding communities.
2. *Research*: where a school staff studies research findings about, for example, effective school and teaching practices, or the process of change.
3. *Action Research*: teachers collecting and analysing information and data about their classrooms and schools, and their students' progress.
4. *Curriculum Initiatives*: the introduction of changes within subject areas or, as in the case of the computer, across curriculum areas.
5. *Teaching Strategies*: when teachers discuss, observe and acquire a range of teaching skills and strategies.

Joyce argues that all these emphases can eventually change the culture of the school substantially. If we look carefully at each door to school improvement, we can discover where each is likely to lead, how the passageways are connected, what proponents of any one approach can borrow from the others, and the costs and benefits of opening any one (or any combination) first. He maintains that single approaches are unlikely to be as powerful an agent for school improvement as a synthesis. The implicit assumption made by Joyce, is that behind the door are a series of interconnecting pathways that lead inexorably to school improvement.

Unfortunately this is not always so. Because of their singular nature, most school improvement strategies fail to a greater or lesser degree to effect the culture of the school. They tend to focus on individual changes, and individual teachers and classrooms, rather than how these changes can fit in with and adapt the organisation and ethos of the school. As a consequence when the door is opened it only leads into a cul-de-sac. This partially accounts for the uneven effect of most of our educational reforms. To continue in this vein for a moment, it seems logical that if the problems of educational change are to be overcome, some way needs to be found of integrating organisational and curriculum change within a coherent strategy. The doors to school improvement need to be opened simultaneously or consecutively and the pathways behind them linked together.

During the past ten years a number of school improvement strategies have been developed in order to do just this. Most of them, in line with the political pressures for decentralisation, have focused on some form of planning at the school level. Development planning, as this approach is commonly called (school growth plans is another popular term for similar activities), provides a generic and paradigmatic illustration of a school improvement strategy, combining as it does selected curriculum change with modifications to the school's management arrangements or organisation. It is a strategy that is becoming increasingly widespread in British schools for example, as teachers and school leaders struggle to take control of the process of change. The book *The Empowered School* (Hargreaves & Hopkins, 1991) that was based on a governmental project on school development plans (Hargreaves et al., 1989) was highly influential.

School development planning is but one example of a contemporary *genre* of organic approaches to school improvement. The 'Self-Managing School' approach, developed in the mid eighties by Brian Caldwell and Jim Spinks (1988) in Tasmania, Australia as a response to a policy for devolved management and budgets for schools, has also been widely disseminated, adapted and emulated in many other school systems, particularly in Canada and the UK. Other examples include, the 'School Growth Plan' approach developed in Toronto, Canada (Stoll & Fink, 1992); the IMTEC approach to institutional development developed in Norway (Dalin et al., 1993), and certain approaches to 'Restructuring' in the United States of America (e.g. Elmore, 1990; Murphy, 1991), are also taking a more fundamental approach to educational reform by transforming the organisation of the school in the quest for enhanced student achievement.

There have also been a number of 'meta-analyses' of the research literature and current best practice that assisted the development of the school improvement movement, if one can deign it so, during this period. The two editions of Michael Fullan's The Meaning of Educational Change (Fullan, 1982, 1991) have influenced a generation of researchers and practitioners; similarly Bruce Joyce and colleagues' (1984) The Structure of School Improvement. Other book length syntheses of research and practice include our *School Improvement in an Era of Change* (Hopkins et al., 1994), Stoll and Fink's (1996) *Changing Our Schools*, and Reynolds and colleagues' (1996) *Making Good Schools*.

This accumulated experience and reflective knowledge has moved school improvement to a position where some reasonably robust guidelines for action have been established. It is appropriate to conclude this review of contemporary school improvement practice by a brief summary. In general, it appears that effective school improvement initiatives tended to:

- focus on specific outcomes which can be related to student learning, rather than succumbing to external pressure to identify non-specific goals such as 'improve exam results';
- draw on theory, research into practice, and the teachers' own experiences in formulating strategies, so that the rationale for the required changes is established in the minds of those expected to bring them about;
- recognise the importance of staff development, since it is unlikely that developments in student learning will occur without developments in teachers' practice;
- provide for monitoring the impact of policy and strategy on teacher practice and student learning early and regularly, rather than rely on 'post-hoc' evaluations;
- 'pull all relevant levers' by emphasising the instructional behaviour of teachers as well as school level processes;
- pay careful attention to the consistency of implementation.

Overview of the Volume

It is against this background that this volume of the International Handbook was conceptualised and contributions solicited. The volume was planned with the recent history of school improvement in mind. The purpose was to locate school improvement within a theoretical and practical framework, to illustrate the challenges facing school improvement strategies from a policy context, to demonstrate the evolution of a range of school improvement strategies in recent times, and through reports of recent research to challenge the assumptions underlying contemporary school improvement approaches. These concerns are reflected in the four major sections of the book.

Section One – Towards a Theory of School Development to reprise what we know about school improvement and to locate it within a practical and theoretical framework. One of the more unfortunate aspects of recent efforts at educational change is the tendency to "pretend to not know what is known" (Joyce Carol Oates, quoted in Glickman, 1991, p. 4). The contributions to this section are an attempt not to fall into this particular trap. Traditionally, the school improvement movement has channelled its energies into devising and developing strategies for educational change. However, as the chapter by Dalin illustrates, such strategies have largely been of a "top-down" or "bottom-up" variety. They have either been externally driven with an emphasis upon structural change and development, or internally generated with an emphasis upon the process of change.

"Top-down" or "bottom-up" improvement strategies tend to premised on uniformity rather than diversity. They are not sufficiently fine tuned enough to address different types of school development, school cultures or school contexts. This point is further reinforced in the chapters by Seashore Louis and Scheerens who both illustrate the limitations of existing models for bringing about sustained development and improvement in schools. They argue forcefully that if school improvement is to become more effective, then its strategies need to be better integrated with and informed by the relevant theoretical and research literatures.

Section Two – The Contemporary Context of School Improvement is an attempt to capture something of the contemporary context of the international policy context, within which school improvement operates. Space obviously precludes detailed international policy analysis, so three examples that represent a range of recent policy initiatives are included. The description of the Kentucky Reform Act in the USA by Whitford and Jones contrasts sharply with the educational change context in Scandinavia as described by Lander and Ekholm. In this respect Kentucky and Scandinavia represent something like the ends of a continuum. The recent history of educational reform in New South Wales, Australia as described by Cuttance presents a middle way, typical of a number of other Western educational systems.The issues raised by these three accounts reflect the tensions in school improvement policies internationally.

Section Three – Tensions and Contrasts in School Improvement Strategies contains a series of discussions on a variety of school improvement strategies. Historically

school improvement has been largely centred on the notion of strategies, and the literature on school improvement has been preoccupied with establishing and refining generic strategies for improving schools. This approach is reflected in Joyce's (1991) representation of the range of school improvement strategies as a series of 'doors'. In order to reflect this tradition, this section contains a series of discussions around individual approaches. The chapters by Wallace on planning, McCulloch on curriculum reform, Joyce and Calhoun on instructional strategies, Smyth on staff development for teachers, and Nias on teacher collaboration represent a fair range of individual school improvement approaches.

What is significant about these contributions is that they not only survey their respective fields, but in all cases subject them to rigorous analysis. All argue for a re-interpretation of what is necessary if these strategies are to result in more effective schooling. Whilst these individual contributions hint at limitations in the various approaches to school improvement, when taken together they suggest a more fundamental critique. Put simply, conventional approaches do not adequately address the more pressing and critical issue of differentiating school improvement strategies to match individual school development needs. As is seen in the following section, failure of both externally and internally driven models of improvement have been their relative inability to delineate particular strategies, or groups of strategies for particular types of school.

Section Four – The Effectiveness of School Improvement Strategies builds on this critique of contemporary school improvement with a series of 'state of the art' reflections and research analyses. Reynolds' synthesis of the school effectiveness and school improvement traditions represents a secure foundation for future work. Calhoun and Joyce, by labelling the research and development, and the site-based models of improvement the "inside out" and "outside in " paradigms of school reform, point to another creative tension in the field. They suggest that in terms of school improvement both paradigms made essentially the same mistake, in so far as "they believed that they had a sure fire strategy, that they were unlikely to fail and thus, didn't conduct school improvement as an inquiry making modifications as they went." Slavin and Stringfield strike a complementary chord in their chapters as they both underline the need for carefully selected instructional strategies which are designed to meet the particular development needs of schools. Yet, within the field of school improvement, at present, it is clear that few such differentiated strategies exist. These four chapters present therefore not only a valuable review of current practice they also point a way forward for school improvement practice, research and theory.

In taking the argument a stage further one raises an issue which has only recently been acknowledged in the literature. This is that much school improvement work assumes that all schools are identical i.e. that a strategy such as development planning will work as well in one school as another. Yet it is evident from the research on school effectiveness that schools are differentially effective. This would suggest that schools at different levels of effectiveness require different school improvement strategies. This is not well trodden territory. It would seem important, however, to recognise that different types of school require different strategies for

development. In other words, that strategies for school development need to fit the "growth state", or particular culture of the school. It is issues such as these that are addressed in the final section of this chapter.

KEY ISSUES FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT[2]

Besides offering an up-to-date review of the field of school improvement, the following chapters also demonstrate the limitations of school improvement efforts in practice. Their collective critique highlights five main problems with current school improvement interventions:

- a failure to embed school improvement initiatives within a contextual and diagnostic analysis of the school;
- a lack of focus upon the level of the classroom and the primacy of instruction;
- a neglect to consider differences between schools and the need for more accurately targeted programmes focused upon the particular growth states of schools;
- the continuing need to understand the complex dynamic between structure and culture in school reform;
- the necessity to focus not just on how innovations impact on schools, but how such innovations can move up to scale and impact on many schools and systems.

In concluding I will comment briefly on each of these issues.

Context specific school improvement. School improvement accounts have been notable for a 'one size fits all' orientation, in which implementation of programme characteristics is assumed to be the same, or similar, independent of any 'presenting characteristics' of schools themselves. Whilst 'context specific' school improvement strategies have been outlined that respect and respond to factors such as the differential socio-economic status of school catchment areas (Stringfield & Teddlie, 1990) and to levels of school effectiveness (Hopkins 1996), it is clear to us that there are a large range of further contextual factors in addition that will influence the likely progress and choice of improvement efforts.

Our own present list of powerful contextual factors would include: *Socio-economic Status of Catchment Area*; (Undoubtedly the nature of the social class distribution, and the closely linked educational levels, that exist in the neighbourhood(s) of schools have effects). *Age Levels of Staff*: (the presence of a group of persons over fifty is often seen as a problem for a school wishing to improve); *Relational Variables:* (the extent to which cliques and groups exist that represent both relational and ideological groupings, which can fragment whole school responses to organisational change); *Open-Ness of Historic Leadership Style* (the extent to which collegiality, ownership and laterality have been historically employed as techniques in the last decade); *(the Local Education Authority* or *School District* (the extent to which schools are facilitated in being 'data rich' by

having value-added data which is made available to schools); and *the Local Market Situation of the School* (the extent to which local competition exists between schools or a school inhabits a monopoly position).

The missing instructional level. Most initiatives are poorly conceptualised in the precise ways in which they might impact upon the learning or classroom level, which in all the most recent evidence is the educational factor with the greatest impact upon pupil outcomes (Reynolds et al, 1994). Whilst many schools are pulling the 'levers' of curriculum and organisation, the precise ways in which these changes impact upon learning is unclear and usually unaddressed. There are some signs that the more rapidly improving schools are aware that 'the learning level' may have changed less than the other levels 'above' it in the school. Any school which is aware of the need to modify this level is aware that the 'technology' of a knowledge base about effective instructional practices is missing in the United Kingdom (Joyce & Weil, 1996; Calhoun & Hopkins, 1997). Surrogates such as 'appraisal' schemes which allow teachers to concentrate on further development of their 'best', self selected areas of practice are rarely a potent mechanism of change.

This is not the place to speculate on the type of instructional strategies that characterise excellent schooling. We are convinced however that powerful learning does not occur by accident. It is usually the product of an effective learning situation created by a skilful teacher (Hopkins, 1997). Such learning and teaching engagements are commonplace in schools that have an ethos characterised by high expectations, collaboration and innovativeness. Schools that are designed and organised to support powerful teaching and learning are on the evidence of this research unfortunately only too rare. Our experience suggests that there are relatively few 'excellent' schools that appear able to conceptualise exactly what they should be doing to effectively implement changes at the instructional level.

Differential "growth states" and strategies. There are two complex issues at stake here. The first is to do with the 'growth state' or 'performance level' of the school; the second is related to the strategy necessary to move the school from one level to another. Space precludes a sufficiently detailed discussion that would allow the disentangling of the two constructs, although we have attempted this task elsewhere (Hopkins, 1996, Hopkins & Harris, 1997).

Research by the American Quality Foundation (1992) suggests that different management strategies are required at different phases of the performance development cycle in organisations. The message here is that there are few universal quality management strategies that are applicable across all stages of an organisation's development. As we have already seen, much current school improvement practice assumes that all strategies are equally effective, and for all schools, irrespective of their effectiveness or stage in the performance cycle. The vital message is that organisations need to change their quality management strategies as they progress through their performance development cycle. The strategies which are effective for improving performance at one stage of the cycle are not necessarily effective at other stages of the cycle. This suggests that, firstly, we should begin to adapt our

strategies for school development according to the "growth state" of the individual school. And, secondly, that we need to know more about how different school improvement strategies affect different schools.

The research base on the effects of school development strategies is unfortunately very weak. We can assume however that the same strategy will not move an ineffective school directly to effectiveness. In beginning this discussion it may be helpful, initially at least, to consider three different growth state and three related school improvement strategies. One could label these strategies Type I, Type II, and Type III.

Type 1 strategies are those that assist failing schools become moderately effective. They need to involve a high level of external support. Failing schools cannot improve themselves. These strategies have to involve a clear and direct focus on a limited number of basic curriculum and organisational issues in order to build the confidence and competence to continue.

Type 11 strategies are those that assist moderately effective schools become effective. These schools need to refine their developmental priorities and focus on specific teaching and learning issues and build the capacity within the school to support this work. These strategies usually involve a certain level of external support, but it is theoretically possible for schools in this category to 'improve' by themselves.

Type 111 strategies are those that assist effective schools remain so. In these instances external support although often welcomed is not necessary as the school searches out and creates its own support networks. Exposure to new ideas and practices, collaboration through consortia or 'pairing' type arrangements seem to be common in these situations.

As work in this area progresses it will hopefully be possible to describe more specifically these *types* of school improvement interventions and strategies. Even at present it is feasible to classify *types* on criteria such as: range and number of priorities addressed; focus *i.e.* curriculum, instruction, school organisation; research knowledge / school generated knowledge; external directives / internal purpose; level of capacity building, and so on. Such a classification, when complete, would allow us to move a step closer to a full conceptualisation of school improvement by linking "type" of strategy to various stages of school development and growth.

The dynamic between structure and culture in school reform. Throughout the remaining chapters in this Handbook there are many references to the term 'school culture.' This is problematic because there is a great deal of confusion about what the word actually means and what the concept looks like in practice. The common view that the culture of the school is best thought of as the procedures, norms, expectations and values of its members does not take us very far. Nor do the popular phrases that describe the culture of the school as 'the way we get things done around here' or 'what keeps the herd moving west' (Deal & Kennedy, 1983, p. 4), advance our understanding in a profound way. At best they provide a cosy image that every one is comfortable with; more often they act as a cover for the sloppy thinking of which we are all at times guilty. Slogans such as this provide an

excuse for not engaging in the difficult and painful conceptual work that is required to gain some clarity on this important concept (Hargreaves, 1995).

We have found it helpful in our own work to heed the sociologists distinction between *structure* and *culture*. Ignoring this important distinction is, in our opinion, one of the main reasons for the confusion that reigns in the discussions of culture and its impact on schools. Structure and culture are of course interdependent, and the relationship between them is dialectical. Structure influences culture, but it works the other way around too. Structures are often regarded as the more basic and profound, in that they generate cultures which not only allow the structures to 'work', but also justify or legitimate the structures. On the other hand, changes in culture *i.e.* value systems and beliefs, can change underlying structures. The two go hand in hand and are mutually reinforcing. At a practical level however, it is often easier to change structures than cultures. But if one changes structures too radically, without paying attention to the underlying culture, then one may get the appearance of change (change in structure), but not the reality of change (change in culture). Similarly it is difficult to sustain changes in culture, perhaps inspired by a charismatic leader, without some concomitant change in structure to support their ideas about curriculum or instructional innovation (see Hargreaves 1994). In terms of school improvement we need to direct equal attention to both structure and culture, and to be alert to the effect one has on the other.

Getting to Scale

This is another complex problem for the new generation of school improvers to confront. The real question is not simply how can we improve schools, but more how can we create capacity for school improvement at all levels of the system? The problems of "getting to scale" are substantial and are only beginning to be recognised (Elmore, 1996). Again this is a theme that is raised by the contributors to Section Four of the Handbook. One of these, Sam Stringfield (1996) has suggested a series of initial hypotheses regarding successfully "getting to scale" at three different levels.

PROGRAMME LEVEL

- P1: To be successfully scaled up, a program/design must have clearly stated goals.
- P2: The program/design should make a clear presentation of the "Technology" that will be employed to achieve the changes.
- P3: The program/design should provide a reasonable depth of evidence that it has, in at least some environments, been able to produce the claimed goals and objectives.
- P4: The program/design should provide a full statement of resources needed to achieve strong implementation.

P5: Technical Assistance on the particulars of the design/program must be available and regularly accessed.
P6: Programs/Designs should facilitate cross-site visitations among schools.
P7: To have credibility and to uphold minimum implementation standards, Programs/Designs should build in triennial implementation checks by representatives of the designer.
P8: Programs should commit a percentage of their ongoing research and development funding to studying sites where their designs did not produce desired results.
P9: The program/design should provide mechanisms for communication among schools and teachers participating in the reform.

SCHOOL LEVEL

S1: The school must have clear goals, well matched to the goals of the program/design the school chooses.
S2: The school must have strong leadership.
S3: The school must have a facilitator and/or a leadership team to guide the effort.
S4: The school must engage in an honest self assessment.
S5: The school should consider multiple options.
S6: The school's facilitator should conduct a secret ballot on whether to adopt a program/design, and on which program/design to adopt.

DISTRICT LEVEL

D1: Clear observable goals that are compatible with the reform design.
D2: The district must provide a reasonably stable environment for reform.
D3: The district must commit to a clear understanding between itself and the restructuring school.

It is on such an iterative approach to theory building, that develops hypotheses on the basis of research evidence and good practice and subjects them to further testing and refinement, that the future of school improvement lies.

This list of issues confronting the next generation of school improvement researchers is still in a rather primitive state. However, four concluding comments are worth making at this stage about effective school improvement strategies. The first is that school improvement strategies are not homogeneous, but holistic and eclectic. The second is that effective strategies have both a direct and a nurturant focus. At one and the same time they are directed at the achievement of pupils, the structure/organisation of the school and the intangible "culture of the school". Third, effective strategies represent a combination of external and internal approaches, the particular blend of strategies being modified to fit the 'context specificity' of the

individual school. Fourth, and the previous comments notwithstanding, there is increasing evidence of a bi-polarity in school improvement interventions. To put it starkly, it is only school improvement strategies that embody a direct curriculum and instructional focus that have any chance of positively impacting on student achievement. It is as simple and as complex as that.

CODA

Even though such discussion is at this stage speculative, the issues raised in this chapter have the potential to give us a better grasp of the dynamics of the process of school improvement. There are a number of issues arising from this discussion which will impinge upon future research policy making and practice.

Firstly in research terms there needs to be more evaluative work conducted into the relative effect of different development strategies upon schools with different growth rates. This will mean, among other things, taking seriously the school's 'internal conditions' or 'capacity for development', as well differentiating between different strategies for school development.

On an international scale there is much potential for cross cultural research into differential school development strategies. Yet, little empirical evidence exists which has considered the nature and impact of different developmental strategies in various countries, or contexts. International surveys have listed the various improvement projects and approaches within developing countries, but there has been little comparative analysis of the transferability or effectiveness of such programmes in different contexts.

In policy terms, it would seem that governments would benefit from moving away from development approaches which do not acknowledge the differences between schools. Instead, their energies at both central and local level should be channelled into identifying differential school capacities for development. Central and local government should be promoting strategies which enable schools to move forward from where they are, rather than apply strategies which remind them where they should be.

Finally, schools and those assisting them, need to focus their improvement efforts on creating powerful contexts for student learning. What are needed are powerful and integrative curriculum and instructional strategies that directly address the range of student learning goals and outcomes. It is through linking more precise specifications of teaching practice to curriculum content that progress in student learning and achievement is made. Strategies for school improvement that focus solely on whole school processes without much substantive content, or have addressed single curriculum innovations or isolated teaching practices, rather than whole school developments are 'doomed to tinkering'. In short, we need to see school improvement whole; and when we do this we begin to meet the real challenge of educational reform.

ENDNOTES

[1] I am very grateful to my colleague Alma Harris for assistance in the preparation of this editorial introduction.

[2] Some of the issues raised in this section of the chapter are also discussed and further elaborated on in our paper "Moving On and Moving Up: Confronting the Complexities of Improvement" (Hopkins et al., in press).

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