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School Improvement: Precedents and prospects

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Contents

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A personal introduction

In the summer of 1979, I read a book that changed my professional life. It seems inconceivable now that until that point in time the conventional wisdom was that schools per se had little effect on the progress of students. Rather the belief was that academic achievement was related to race, class, gender or genetics. This fallacy was laid bare with the publication of *Fifteen Thousand Hours* by Michael Rutter and his colleagues (1979). This was one of the first major studies to demonstrate unequivocally that schools **do** make a difference and that the school a child goes to, indeed the classroom they join, makes a significant difference to their academic progress and subsequent life chances. Rutter and his colleagues compared the 'effectiveness' of ten secondary schools in South London, on a range of student outcome measures, and found that despite similarities in intake and socio-economic context, some schools performed better and were more effective than others. The identification of the factors associated with the effective school soon led to my involvement in the nascent school improvement movement, where we used this research to begin to develop strategies and policies for making the school, and later school systems, more effective. The rest as they say is history.

School Improvement as a field of action and research has now come of age. In their recent review of sixty years of research on Educational Administration, Hallinger and Kovačević (2019) identify school improvement as one of the key areas of research and development to have emerged during that period. They maintain that the field is not only well specified, but also has a positive effect on practice. This contention is admirably supported in the American Journal of Education, August 2020 on 'Changing The Grammar of Schooling'.

In this paper I trace my own 40-year involvement in the evolution of school improvement and provide a personal perspective on the development of the field. The narrative begins with outlining a brief history of educational change and the evolution of school improvement as a series of phases; then considers some of the most relevant critiques of policy and practice; before summarising the current knowledge base as a series of 'myths', with associated theories of action for implementation. On the basis of this, an overarching framework is presented, together with practical examples of strategies for system and school improvement that build on contemporary best practice. Finally: the lacuna that is currently preventing school improvement policy and practice from ensuring excellence and equity is confronted; approaches for transformation are considered; and a shift in paradigm is proposed, based on critical theory.

A brief history of educational change and school improvement

It is surprising to realise, as Fullan (2016) has pointed out, how short the history of serious investigation into the change process in schools actually is. It is also quite remarkable to appreciate that this recent history stems from a specific event on a particular day. This was the launch of Sputnik on 4th October 1957. The success of Sputnik created a crisis of confidence in the USA; the nation was chagrined to find that the Russians had beaten them in this first major round of the space race. As a response, the decision was taken to invest heavily in education to increase the knowledge, problem solving ability and productivity of the next generation of Americans, and to ensure that this would never ever happen again.

curricula do not disseminate just by themselves and that there needs to be a strong connection between teaching style and curriculum development.

This decision led to the first phase of educational change that dates from the early 1960s, which had an emphasis on the **adoption of curriculum materials**. During this phase, educational change strategies were conceived of within a top-down or 'centre-periphery' model. The curriculum reform movement was intended to have major impact on student achievement through the production and dissemination of exemplary curriculum materials – the belief being that if the materials were of sufficiently high quality they would disseminate and be adopted almost automatically. This was a flawed assumption and although the materials were often excellent, in the main they failed to have an impact on teaching.

Teachers proved resilient to the adoption of these materials and educational archaeologists are still finding the partly rifled packages of original materials where teachers had taken relevant worksheets and activities and incorporated them into their existing lesson plans. This meant that the meta-cognitive and epistemological content and quality of the curricula were completely squandered. Although this analysis applies more to North America than to the UK or Australia, the materials emanating from the Schools Council in England in the late 1960s (see Stenhouse, 1980, for a comprehensive account of these projects) cannot escape censure. The failure of the curriculum reform movement to impact on student learning was predicated on the fact that curricula do not disseminate just by themselves and that there needs to be a strong connection between teaching style and curriculum development.

As a consequence of this failure, there was a subsequent emphasis, covering most of the 1970s, on **understanding the process of implementation**. A more adaptive style of educational change strategies was assumed during this period, as it became increasingly apparent that top-down models of change do not work by themselves. It was now acknowledged that implementation does not occur spontaneously as a result of legislative fiat, and that teachers require in-service training to acquire new knowledge and skills. It became clear that implementation is an extremely complex and lengthy process that requires a sensitive combination of

strategic planning, individual learning and commitment to succeed. The contribution of Michael Fullan during this phase, in particular *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (2016) was pivotal. The popularisation of concepts such as the 'Implementation Dip', the emphasis on teacher in-service development and the identification of change agent skills, all stem from this period (for more detail see Hopkins, 2001).

The next significant event in the history of educational change came with the publication of *Fifteen Thousand Hours* by Michael Rutter and his colleagues (1979). This research was referred to in the introduction and many regard it as laying the basis for **the effective schools movement**. The 'effective schools' described in *Fifteen Thousand Hours* were characterised by factors 'as varied as the degree of academic emphasis, teacher actions in lessons, the availability of incentives and rewards, good conditions for pupils, and the extent to which children are able to take responsibility' (Rutter et al, 1979, p 178). It was this constellation of factors that Rutter and his colleagues later referred to as the school's 'ethos'. They further claimed (Rutter et al, 1979, p 179) that the

> *... cumulative effect of these various social factors was considerably greater than the effect of any of the individual factors on their own. The implication is that the individual actions or measures may combine to create a particular ethos, or set of values, attitudes and behaviours which will become characteristic of the school as a whole.*

The identification of the factors associated with the effective school soon led to a complementary emphasis on school improvement – strategies for making the school more effective.

The genesis of **the school improvement movement** was both accelerated and given definition by the OECD's International School Improvement Project (ISIP) (Hopkins, 1987). ISIP was a major project involving some 150 people in 14 countries. The project work was carried out by cross-national groups that focused on one of six aspects of school improvement

- school-based review
- leadership
- external support
- research and evaluation
- the role of local authorities, and
- conceptual mapping of school improvement.

In addition to Hopkins' (1987) comprehensive overview, ISIP also produced a significant range of published outcomes that focused on both practical strategies and policy advice. With the benefit of hindsight, Reynolds and Hopkins (2001, p 12) later commented that this phase of school improvement tended to be 'loosely conceptualised and under-theorised. It did not represent a systematic, programmatic and coherent approach to school change.'

Despite that, ISIP put school improvement on the map and influenced a wide range of school improvement interventions that were based on tested practices. Programs such as *Improving the Quality of Education for All* (Hopkins, 2002) and *High Reliability Schools* (HRS) (Reynolds et al, 2006) in England, the *Improving School Effectiveness Project* in Scotland (MacBeath and Mortimore, 2001), the *Manitoba School Improvement Project* in Canada (Earl et al, 2003) and the *Dutch National School Improvement Project* (van Velzen et al, 1985) were all examples

of well-researched school improvement programs that were productive in terms of student achievement. All of these interventions took advantage of a key finding from Nunnery (1998) that, in general, schools are more likely to achieve measurable improvements in student performance if they are connected to an external reform-assistance team, than if they try to go it alone.

A second related development was the growth, especially in the United States, of comprehensive models of school reform that could be adopted by individual schools. These include approaches such as the *Comer School Development Model* (1992), Glickman's *Renewing America's Schools* (1993), Levin's 'Accelerated schools' (Levin, 2005), Sizer's 'The coalition of essential schools' (1989), Bob and Nancy Slavin's *Success for All* (Slavin, 1996; Slavin et al, 1996; Slavin and Madden, 2010) and the 'The New American Schools Designs' (Stringfield, Ross and Smith, 1996).

As this emphasis on school improvement deepened, so did the interest in **large-scale system reform** intensify. In his chapter in *Change Wars*, Sir Michael Barber (2009) explains the progression in this way by reminding us that it was the school effectiveness research in the 1980s that gave us increasingly well-defined portraits of the effective school, which led in the 1990s to increasing knowledge of school improvement – ie, how to achieve effectiveness. In the same way, we have in the last decade begun to learn far more about the features of an effective educational system, but are now only beginning to understand the dynamics of improvement at system level.

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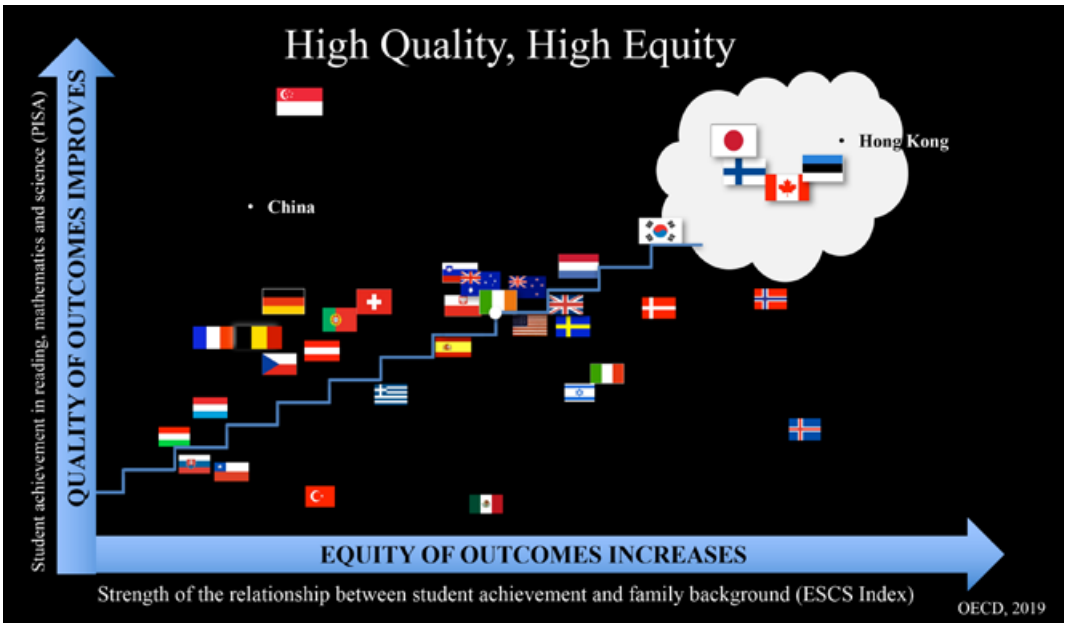
It is PISA that has given us these 'increasingly well-defined portraits' of the effective school system. PISA is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment, Since 2000, PISA has involved more than 90 countries and economies, and around 3,000,000 students worldwide. PISA 2021 is the eighth cycle of the Programme. Every three years, PISA tests what 15-year-olds can do in reading, mathematics and science. The tests are designed to capture how students master certain skills, such as reading strategies; problem solving in mathematics; and critical reading in science – skills that are important beyond the classroom. PISA therefore focuses not on knowledge acquisition and retention, but rather on the application of knowledge in applied situations.

Despite some recent critiques, it is important to emphasise the contribution made by PISA to our understanding of the dynamics of educational improvement at scale (Schleicher, 2018). We need to remind ourselves of the following two key issues.

The first is that as PISA has now been administered on eight occasions (the eighth PISA round was administered in 2021 and at the time of writing is still to report) we have significant real-time information as to how national performance changes (or does not) over time. As is intimated in Figure 1, the performance of some countries has remained stable. Finland, for example, has consistently scored very well, while the trajectories of others have moved both up and down. What explains the dramatic movement of Poland, say, from the bottom right-hand segment to the top-left in a little over six years, or the equally dramatic fall of my own country of Wales from the top-left segment to the ignominy of the bottom-right? There are good explanatory reasons

Figure 1. OECD comparison of national performance against two criteria



for both of these movements, related to the policy choices made by respective national governments. The details need not concern us here. The point is that we are getting to a stage where we can predict cause and effect in system change related to the policy levers that governments, for whatever reasons, choose to select.

The second issue is also illustrated in Figure 1. Here the OECD compares national performance against two criteria. The first is 'excellence', represented on the vertical axis by mean performance on PISA reading, mathematics and science scores in 2019; the second is 'equity', represented by the strength of the relationship between achievement and family background. When the OECD average for both dimensions is inserted, it enables a two-by-two matrix to be constructed. So, in the high-excellence/high-equity segment is Finland, and now Canada, with both Australia and the UK remaining in the high-excellence/low-equity segment. The advantage of this analysis is that it gives an indication not just of academic performance, but also of how far aims of social justice and moral purpose have been achieved. It also helps guide systems on their ascent to the 'stairway to heaven'.

For the moment let us summarise more formally how, over the last five decades or so, the school effectiveness and school improvement research bases have gained prominence and recognition on the international stage. As has just been illustrated, in both a theoretical and empirical sense, they have matured through a wide range of well-documented research projects, interventions and innovations, across a range of countries. This work in general has described how efforts to help schools become increasingly effective learning environments, for the full range of their students, have been more or less successful. In our comprehensive review, 'School and system improvement: A narrative state of the art review',

(Hopkins et al, 2014) we presented and described evidence of the effects of reform efforts at the school and system levels, through articulating five phases of development, as seen in Table 1.

- Phase One – Understanding the organisational culture of the school.
- Phase Two – Action research and research initiatives at the school level.
- Phase Three – Managing change and comprehensive approaches to school reform.
- Phase Four – Building capacity for student learning at the local level and the continuing emphasis on leadership.
- Phase Five – Towards systemic improvement.

Table 1. Five phases of research on school and system improvement (Hopkins et al, 2014)

Phase of school and system improvement	Key features of each phase
Phase One Understanding the organisational culture of the school	▪ The legacy of the organisational development research ▪ The cultures of the schools and the challenges inherent in change
Phase Two Action research and research initiatives at the school level	▪ Teacher research and school review ▪ Research programs such as the Rand Study, DESSI,[1] Special Strategies and the OECD International School Improvement Project
Phase Three Managing change and comprehensive approaches to school reform	▪ Managing centralised policy change ▪ 'Comprehensive' approaches to school reform, such as: Success for All, New American Schools, High Reliability Schools and IQEA[2]
Phase Four Building capacity for student learning at the local level and the continuing emphasis on leadership	▪ Professional learning communities and networks ▪ Recognising the continuing importance and impact of leadership
Phase Five Towards systemic improvement	▪ The influence of the knowledge base and the impact of national and international benchmarking studies ▪ Differentiated approaches to school and system reform, transformation and critical theory

As has been evidenced in this review so far, school and system improvement as a field can be seen to have evolved through a number of phases. These phases are not mutually exclusive; they overlap and flow into one another, but they do represent a natural progression. The more that we learn about them, the quicker we can progress through them.

- **Phase One** provided a foundation with its emphasis on how organisations can improve through specific interventions and the highlighting of the importance of culture in any change process.
- **Phase Two** focused on teacher action research, school self-review and concern for meeting the needs of disadvantaged students. It began to lay out the distinctive educational values and strategies that define the school improvement field.
- **Phase Three** built on the emerging school effectiveness knowledge base, and brought to the surface the idea of the school as the unit of change. This phase included the greater attention to the importance of staff development integrated into replicable comprehensive school reform approaches that addressed both organisational and classroom improvement.
- **Phase Four** emphasised the ability to scale up reforms to produce valued outcomes across a number of schools, and the recognition of the vital role that districts and local education authorities have to play in school improvement. Phase Four also included an increasing focus on the importance of school leadership as a means of enhancing the learning and achievement of all students.
- **Phase Five** continues evolving. We are seeing the spread of the knowledge base globally and, at the same time, learning more about achieving school improvement at scale – systemic reform. There is also, as we will see in the final section of this paper, a frustration by many at the uneven pace of change, which is leading to a clamour for 'transformation' (Salzburg, 2022). It will be suggested, however, that a more productive way forward lies in the application of critical theory to school improvement policy and practice.

The narrative portrayed here is of 'journey', and it is in the nature of the journey that it progresses. As the gains in knowledge and practice in each phase are consolidated, we understand more about the one we are currently inhabiting. This reflection also helps us think about the future and consider the challenges that will confront us as we continue to make progress. This is where the chronological nature of a review like this has its downside. Writing in this way gives the impression that school and system reform is an iterative and logical process – sadly this is far from the truth. Before we segue too glibly into describing an over-arching framework for school improvement, we need to consider more thoroughly the contemporary critiques of educational change and the fault lines that engender them. So, in the following two sections of this paper, I engage with this reality by first considering some of the most relevant critiques of policy and practice, and then portraying the current knowledge base as a series of 'myths' with associated theories of action.

Yet debates still rage: Which policy levers and strategies make the difference?

The accumulation of research evidence and practical wisdom outlined in the previous section has potentially a powerful impact on student performance. Despite this, debates still rage over which policy levers and strategies actually make the difference. This is the issue that I addressed directly in *Exploding the Myths of School Reform* (Hopkins, 2013) by arguing that the failure of so many educational reform efforts to impact on the learning and performance of students is due to misguided action based on a number of myths associated with school reform.

The discussion of the myths, which are outlined in the following section, stems from a deep frustration that, despite what we collectively know about school and system reform, the potential contained in this knowledge is not systematically realised. This is because, as Fullan (2011) says, 'the wrong drivers are chosen', and often occurs because of ineptness, misunderstanding or cultural and bureaucratic hegemony.

This is a theme that has been taken up and pursued with much passion and intellectual vigour by a number of the most influential opinion leaders in our field. Three are reviewed here.

Michael Fullan's (2011, 2021) papers *'Choosing the wrong drivers for whole system reform'* and the more recent *'The right drivers for whole system success'* address this issue face on. In these papers Fullan describes how certain popular policy options are implemented, but without any serious consideration of context. The following quotes give a flavour of the argument (Fullan 2011).

> *A 'wrong driver' is a deliberate policy force that has little chance of achieving the desired result, while a 'right driver' is one that ends up achieving better measurable results for students.* (p 3)

> *The glue that binds the effective drivers together is the underlying attitude, philosophy, and theory of action. The mindset that works for whole-system reform is the one that inevitably generates individual and collective motivation and corresponding skills to transform the system.* (p 5)

Fullan's drivers may be wrong for one of two reasons, or both. They may be wrong because they are wrong, or wrong because they are inappropriate to the stage that the school or system is currently at. Fullan (2011, p 5) comments as follows.

> *In the rush to move forward, leaders, especially from countries that have not been progressing, tend to choose the wrong drivers. Such ineffective drivers fundamentally miss the target. There are four main 'wrong driver' culprits ...*
>
> 1. *Accountability: using test results, and teacher appraisal, to reward or punish teachers and schools, versus capacity building;*

2. *Individual teacher and leadership quality: promoting individual vs group solutions;*
3. *Technology: investing in and assuming that the wonders of the digital world will carry the day vs instruction;*
4. *Fragmented strategies vs integrated or systemic strategies.*

In reflecting on this issue, it is worth quoting David Hargreaves (2012, p 25) and note his quite appropriate emphasis on the contextualisation of any change.

> *There may be real gains from looking around the world for some educational policies and practices that might benefit our schools. But a transformation of schooling that is self-generating and sustainable requires that attention be paid to the deep cultural capital that underpins the life of individual schools, of partnerships and alliances, and of the school system as a whole. This is the key lesson we learn from China and East Asia, one by which we can develop our version, based on our own well-established native roots of extended moral purpose and distributed system leadership.*

Pasi Sahlberg ... explains the success of the Finnish educational system, not in terms of the adoption of a range of external strategies and policies, but more in terms of carefully reflective, customised and culturally relevant approaches.

So, the key point being advanced here by both Fullan and Hargreaves is the danger of promiscuous policy borrowing; a contention that one finds enthusiastically endorsed in the recent writings of Pasi Sahlberg.

Pasi Sahlberg (2021) in his bestselling book, *Finnish Lessons*, explains the success of the Finnish educational system, not in terms of the adoption of a range of external strategies and policies, but more in terms of carefully reflective, customised and culturally relevant approaches. Listen to him speak and he talks about the Finnish paradox that 'less is more' with the following implications: teach less, learn more; test less, learn more; and ensure more equity through growing diversity. This is not a universal panacea and it certainly does not apply to all systems, but is an intelligent response to the cultural context of Finland. The Finns themselves sensibly prefer to combine knowledge of what works, together with a view as to how the Finnish system itself will continue to evolve.

In a related blog, *Global Educational Reform Movement is here!*, Sahlberg (2012) argues that the main strategies for developing an equitable, high-performing education system are similar to those underlying the social and economic transformation of Finland into a welfare state and a competitive knowledge society. He continues that, because of the professional strength and moral health of Finnish schools, their system has remained virtually free of the viruses associated with the Global Educational Reform Movement (GERM). These are the collection of ubiquitous policy agendas critiqued above by myself, Fullan and Hargreaves. The main components of GERM are

- standardisation
- focus on core subjects
- search for low-risk ways to reach learning goals
- use of corporate management models, and
- test-based accountability policies.

By contrast (2012) he argues that the typical features of teaching and learning in Finland are

- *great confidence in teachers and principals as high-performing professionals*
- *encouraging teachers and students to try new ideas and approaches, in other words, to put curiosity, imagination and creativity at the heart of learning; and*
- *seeing the purpose of teaching and learning as pursuing the happiness of learning and cultivating the development of the whole child.*

He concludes that:

> *The best way to avoid infections of GERM is to prepare teachers and leaders well.*

and

> *Lessons from Finland will help you kill 99.9% of GERMs!*

Identify and meet the needs of children on trajectories of low achievement

The conclusion to be drawn from the critiques of the current policy reform reviewed above is that the potential impact of the knowledge bases on student achievement and the practical strategies derived from them noted earlier, has not been realised. The ubiquity of the 'Wrong Drivers' and 'GERM' approaches to school reform has placed a ceiling on student performance in those jurisdictions that follow the paucity of that orthodoxy. Space precludes a detailed analysis of this proposition but the contention is widely accepted by informed opinion (Harris and Jones, 2017; Hargreaves and Shirley, 2009) as well as those quoted earlier. The question remains, how can the school improvement knowledge base be reformulated so that it can have a consistent and positive impact on student performance? My attempt at doing this is summarised in the following section of this paper.

On considering myths and proposing theories of action

The failure of so many educational reform efforts to impact on the learning and performance of students is due to misguided action, based on a number of myths associated with school reform that remain prevalent in education to the present day (Hopkins, 2013). It is instructive here to be reminded of the danger of living by myths, as Jonathan Powell (2010, p 5) does in the following quotation from Machiavelli's *The Prince* that he cited in his book, *The New Machiavelli: How to Wield Power in the Modern World.*

> *But since it is my object to write what shall be useful to whosoever understands it, it seems to me better to follow the real truth of things than an imaginary view of them. For many republics and princedoms have been imagined that were never known to exist in reality.*

The failure of so many educational reform efforts to impact on the learning and performance of students is due to misguided action, based on a number of myths

Powell's point is that too often in politics a conventional wisdom emerges that satisfies a particular group's version of the truth and quite rapidly enters the zeitgeist but, at best, it is a myth, a parody of the truth. If the myths are then acted on, the subsequent actions will fail. Sadly, myths abound in education; think for example of the debates around class size, teaching quality and the influence of external accountability.

In *Exploding the Myths of School Reform* an alternative approach was taken to reviewing the evolution of the knowledge base on schools and system reform (Hopkins, 2013). The use of the 'myth' as a narrative artifice provided a structure for the critique of contemporary school and system research, policy and practice. In identifying the ten myths, and then 'exploding' them, enabled a realistic and increasingly precise and aligned approach to school and system reform to be presented.

The overarching narrative went something like this

1. We know increasing amounts about school and system reform.
2. Unfortunately, this knowledge is often misused, and an illusion or myth is generated that leads in unproductive directions and consequently has little impact on the learning and achievement of students.
3. In order to fulfil our moral purpose, we must correct the myths and present 'the real truth of things'.
4. The knowledge then needs to be couched as theories of action that guide implementation within an overall strategy for school and system reform.

In this section, it may be helpful to signpost the future direction of the field in an action-oriented way, by both reflecting on the phases outlined above and being mindful of the myths that are increasingly accreting our work. The following eight proposals for implementation are, as has just been suggested, couched as theories of action within an overall strategy for school and system reform. The overall strategy and the Unleashing Greatness framework are described in the fourth section of this paper.

1. All successful schools and systems have developed a robust narrative related to the achievement and learning of students expressed as moral purpose, which is predicated on an unrelenting commitment to ensure that all learners will reach their potential wherever that may lead.

   When schools and systems are driven by a narrative grounded in moral purpose related to student achievement and learning, then all students are more likely to fulfil their potential.

   Key questions – What is the nature of successful narrative related to student achievement and learning in school and system reform? How and by whom are they constructed?

2. There is an obstinate myth that poverty is a determinant of student and school performance. This is an important myth to explode for both social justice and strategic reasons. Not only is it morally wrong that poverty is a determinant of educational achievement, but it is also important to remind ourselves that those 'effective schools' and systems that do break the association between poverty and achievement share similar characteristics.

   When schools and teachers are of high quality, poverty is no longer a determinant of educational success.

   Key questions – What are those transferable practices of schools and systems that comprise that 'high quality' and deny the association between poverty and performance? How is the necessary 'will' generated within schools, their communities and the system to ensure that these practices are adopted in a sustainable way?

3. It is the enhancement of the quality of teaching, rather than structural change that needs to be the central theme of any improvement strategy. The quality of teaching is necessarily related to system goals and targeted support that are likely to have a heavy emphasis in the first instance on the teaching of literacy and numeracy, and the development of curiosity.

   When the focus of policy is on the quality of teaching rather than structural change, then student achievement will increase.

   Key questions – How can the research knowledge on effective teaching be best translated into specifications of practice for teachers and who is best suited to do it? What are the most effective recruitment strategies and forms of professional development opportunities that develop a common 'practice' of teaching and learning through blending theory, evidence and action through collaborative forms of enquiry?

4. The development of this professional practice occurs within a system context where there is increasing clarity on the standards implied by the goals set, and the generation of the most appropriate curriculum, teaching and above all learning strategies necessary to achieve those standards. These goals will necessarily relate to learning skills, dispositions and citizenship practices as well as the more usual narrow definitions of achievement.

   When the focus is on 'powerful learning', then students will both attain more and develop their cognitive and social skills.

   Key questions – What in operational and implementable terms are those learning skills and values needed to create the increasingly technological citizen of the future? How can such richer and more profound societal goals be developed and put into practice?

5. To enable this, procedures are needed to provide formative, ongoing and transparent data (both assessment data and inspection evidence) on the performance of the student, school and system that facilitate improvements in learning and teaching. There needs to be a shift from external to internal forms of accountability over time as the school and system makes progress.

   When data is used to monitor, feedback and enhance student performance on a range of learning goals, then students' progress will more quickly accelerate.

   Key questions – What are the most appropriate accountability and assessment structures for schools and systems at the various stages of their development? What are the most effective metrics for assessing students' achievement, learning and progress at the various stages of their development?

6. Student and school performance is enhanced by teachers and leaders 'going deeper' and intervening early, following diagnosis that reflects a range of differential strategies based on performance, with targets being set that are related to implementation. In most schools and systems the focus has been on initiation rather than implementation, yet without deep implementation student achievement and learning can never be transformed.

   When teachers and schools go deeper in their search for improvement (rather than adopting fads) then the student learning experience also deepens and outcomes improve.

   Key questions – How can the educational culture be shifted more towards an implementation focus rather than an initiation focus that responds reactively to the latest trend? What are the most effective leadership and monitoring practices that lead to deep implementation?

7. The development of professional practice, utilisation of data and early intervention using differential strategies, takes place in schools where the leadership has: very high levels of expectation for both teachers and students; an unrelenting focus on the quality of learning and teaching; created management structures that ensure an orderly learning environment and that empower and generate professional responsibility and accountability; developed a work culture that takes pride in sharing excellence; a high degree of trust and reciprocity when appropriate; and supported leadership development across a locality.

   When leadership is instructionally focused, widely distributed, within a systems context, then both teachers and students are able to capitalise fully on their capacity to learn and achieve.

   Key questions – What are the most effective leadership development programs that can ensure the acquisition of such comprehensive leadership practices? How is leadership expertise best deployed within a school and system to ensure sustained success for all?

8. Finally, system-level structures need to be established that reflect the processes just described, linking together the various levels of the system through to the school and classroom, developing capacity by balancing professional autonomy and accountability, and promoting disciplined innovation as a consequence of networking. These activities combine to produce a work culture that has at its core strong pressure to improve, takes seriously its responsibility to act on and change context, and that embodies a commitment to focus, flexibility and collaboration.

   When the system as a whole takes student learning seriously then moral purpose is achieved.

   Key questions – What are the most effective school and system strategies at each stage of development and how are they best sequenced over time? How is a 'guiding coalition' developed at all levels of the system to ensure the generation, implementation and sustainability of an educational narrative driven by moral purpose?

As will be seen in the following section of this paper, these propositions and theories of action underpin our current approaches to school and system improvement, and provide an antidote to the 'Wrong Drivers' and 'GERM' critiques.

Drivers to raise achievement and build capacity for the next stage of reform

So, what does a system reform strategy look like, based on these propositions? It is clear from the discussion in the previous section, that moral purpose may be at the heart of successful school and system improvement. We will not, however, be able to realise this purpose without powerful and increasingly well-specified strategies and tools to allow us to deal with the challenges presented by globalisation, as well as the increasingly turbulent and complex communities and contexts we serve. This is the key message here – that moral purpose and strategic action are opposite sides of the same coin. Neither is sufficient by itself. We realise our moral purpose through strategic action, and strategic action is the means of delivering on our moral purpose.

moral purpose and strategic action are opposite sides of the same coin. Neither is sufficient by itself.

We know all too well from our daily work that 'top-down' and 'outside-in' approaches to educational change produce structures, policy options and ways of working that are instrumental and regress performance to the mean. They generate bureaucratic forms of organisation that, although efficient and probably necessary, certainly in the early phases of the evolution of a system, also have a dark side. Max Weber (cited in Hopkins, 2013, p 279), whose classic studies on bureaucracy are still insightful, warns that they pose a threat to individual freedoms and that ongoing bureaucratisation leads to a 'polar night of icy darkness', in which increasing rationalisation of human life traps individuals in the 'iron cage' of bureaucratic, rule-based, rational control. So dominant have been bureaucratic forms of administration in our public services and notably in education, that they now appear to be the norm. As a consequence, they place a ceiling on the move of a system towards both excellence and equity. It is this insight that is at the basis of the 'Wrong Drivers' and 'GERM' critiques.

I have argued for some time that the key to managing system reform is by strategically rebalancing 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' change over time (Hopkins, 2007). The argument goes something like the following.

- Most agree that when standards are too low and too varied, some form of direct state/outside intervention is necessary. Typically, the resultant 'national prescription' proves very successful in raising standards in the short term.
- However, progress soon tends to plateau and, whilst a bit more improvement could be squeezed out, especially in underperforming schools, one has to question whether prescription still offers the recipe for sustained large-scale reform into the medium/long term.
- There is a growing recognition that schools need to lead the next phase of reform. If the hypothesis is correct, however, it must categorically not be a naïve return to the not-so-halcyon days when a thousand flowers bloomed and the educational life chances of too many of our children wilted.

- The implication is that we need a transition from an era of Prescription to an era of Professionalism – in which the balance between national prescription and schools leading reform will change.

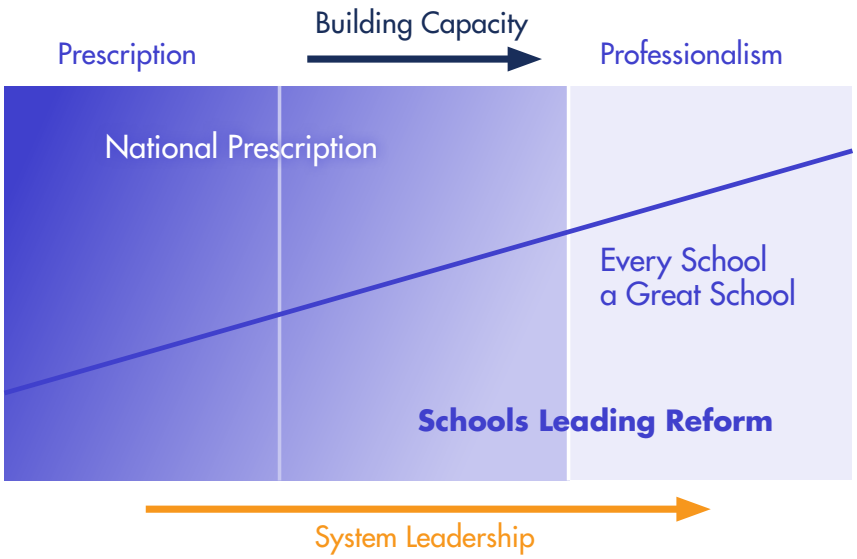
However, achieving this rebalancing is not straightforward. As Michael Fullan (2003) has commented, it takes capacity to build capacity and, if there is insufficient capacity to begin with, it is folly to announce that a move to 'Professionalism' provides the basis of a new approach. The key question is 'how do we get there?' because we cannot simply move from one era to the other without self-consciously building professional capacity throughout the system. Building professional capacity implies the adoption of authentic school improvement principles and strategies that raise standards and emancipate at the same time.

It is this progression that is illustrated in Figure 2 and discussed at length in *Every School a Great School* (Hopkins, 2007). This insight seems by now to have achieved widespread support. Barber (2009) stressed the need for system leadership along with capacity building. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) argued for a 'Fourth Way of Change' that consisted of combining top-down 'national vision, government steering and support' with 'professional involvement' and 'public engagement', all for the purpose of promoting 'learning and results'. It is this general approach that seems to feed current debates on transformational change in education (eg, Salzburg, 2022).

It is worth taking a little time to unpack the thinking underlying the diagram: four points in particular need to be made.

- The first is to emphasise that neither top-down nor bottom-up change works when conducted in isolation; they have to be in balance, in a creative tension. At any one time, the balance between the two will of course depend on context.
- Secondly, at the early stages of a reform program, when the system is in a relatively poor-performing state, then more central direction is needed. This reflects the initial emphasis on national prescription, as seen in the left-hand segment of the diagram. Over time, as competence and confidence increase, the policy agenda and school practice move towards the right-hand side of the diagram.

Figure 2. Towards system-wide sustainable reform



- Third, it should be no surprise to realise that the right-hand segment is relatively unknown territory. It implies horizontal and lateral ways of working with assumptions and governance arrangements very different from what is conventionally known. The main difficulty in imagining this landscape is that the thinking of most people is constrained by their experiences within the power structure and norms of the left-hand segment of the diagram, and the binary distinction between top-down and bottom-up.
- Finally, it needs to be reiterated that the transition from prescription to professionalism, as implied by the diagram, is not easy to achieve. In order to move from one to the other, strategies are required that not only continue to raise standards, but also build capacity within the system through an emancipatory process.

the transition from 'prescription' to 'professionalism' requires strategies that not only continue to raise standards but also build capacity and realise emancipation within the system.

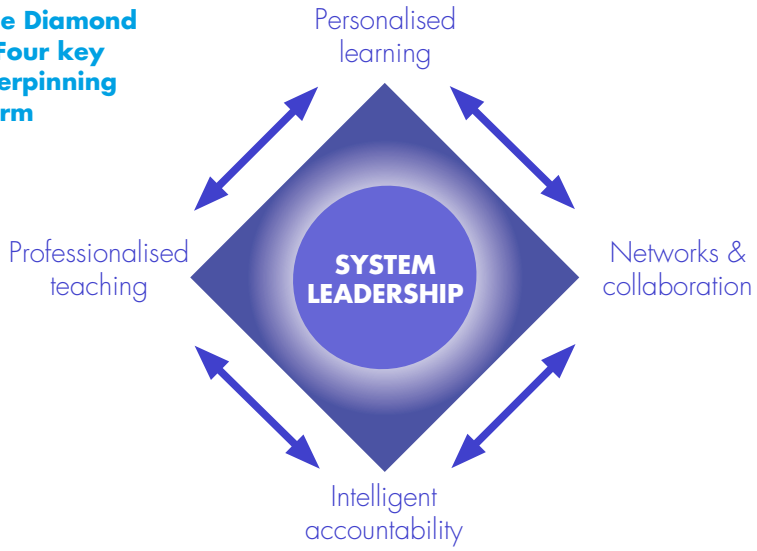
It needs to be emphasised that successful school improvement is neither singularly system-led nor led by individual schools – it is best achieved by one supporting the other in an actively interdependent, mutually beneficial relationship. This is why **System Leadership** as the main driver of such an approach is so important. System leaders care about, and work for, the success of other schools as well as their own. They measure their success in terms of improving student learning and increasing achievement, and strive to both raise the bar and narrow the gap(s). Crucially they are willing to shoulder system leadership roles in the belief that in order to change the larger system you have to engage with it in a meaningful way (Hopkins, 2009; Higham, Hopkins and Matthews, 2009).

As has already been intimated, the transition from 'prescription' to 'professionalism' requires strategies that not only continue to raise standards but also build capacity and realise emancipation within the system. This point is key, as one cannot just drive to continue to raise standards in an instrumental way, and one also needs to develop social, intellectual and organisational capital (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). Building capacity demands that we replace numerous central initiatives with a national consensus on a limited number of educational trends. The four drivers – personalised learning; professionalised teaching; networks and collaboration; and intelligent accountability – provide the core strategy for systemic improvement in most high-performing, 'good to great' educational systems. They are the canvas on which system leadership is exercised (Hopkins, 2016).

As seen in Figure 3, showing the 'Diamond of Reform', the four trends coalesce and mould to context, through the exercise of responsible system leadership. To reiterate the three crucial points

- First, strategies need both to raise standards and also build capacity.
- Second, single reforms do not work, as it is only clusters of linked policy initiatives that will provide the necessary traction.
- Third, however, it is system leadership that drives implementation and adapts policies to context.

Figure 3. The Diamond of Reform: Four key drivers underpinning system reform



Personalised learning

The current focus on personalisation, in many systems, is about putting students at the heart of the education process, so as to tailor teaching to individual need, interest and aptitude in order to fulfil every young person's potential. Many schools and teachers have enmeshed curriculum and teaching methods to meet the needs of children and young people with great success for many years. What is new is the drive to make the best practices universal by

- focusing on curriculum entitlement, STEM and choice
- systematically inducting students into a range of learning skills
- making assessment for learning routine, and
- the promotion of student agency and wellbeing.

A successful system of personalised learning means clear learning pathways through the education system and the motivation to become independent, e-literate, fulfilled, lifelong learners.

Professionalised teaching

Significant empirical evidence suggests that teaching quality is the most significant factor influencing student learning that is under the control of the school. The phrase 'professionalised teaching' implies that teachers are on a par with other professions, in terms of diagnosis, the application of evidence-based practices and professional pride. The image here is of teachers who

- consistently expand their repertoire of pedagogic strategies to personalise learning for all students
- use data to evaluate the learning needs of their student
- collectively generate theories of action for teaching and learning through Instructional Rounds, and
- engage in collegial and peer-coaching relationships to embed and extend pedagogic practice.

Professionalised teaching also implies schools that adopt innovative approaches to timetabling and the deployment of increasingly differentiated staffing models, all in the quest for reducing within-school variation.

Intelligent accountability

Because of the resilience of external forms of accountability, it is often necessary to compensate by increasing the emphasis on internal forms of accountability. The most common approaches would be

- the employment of moderated teacher assessment at all levels
- bottom-up targets for every child and use of pupil performance data
- value-added measures of school performance to help identify strengths/weaknesses
- the school holding itself publicly accountable through self-evaluation, and publishing its own profile of strengths and weaknesses, and
- benchmark comparisons, giving a more rounded picture of the school's performance.

It is these forms of accountability that

- allow a sharper fix on the focus of personalisation, and
- develop the professional skill of the teaching staff involved.

As a consequence, when the balance between external and internal accountability becomes more even, it also becomes more 'intelligent' and appreciative. The assumption also is that over time, as schools increasingly lead reform, internal forms of accountability will become the more important.

Networking and collaboration

This relates to the various ways in which networks of schools can stimulate and spread innovation, as well as collaborate to provide curriculum diversity, extended services and community support. The prevalence of networking practice supports the contention that there is no contradiction between strong, independent schools and strong networks, rather the reverse. Nor is there a contradiction between collaboration and competition – many sectors of the economy are demonstrating that the combination of competition and collaboration delivers the most rapid improvements. The key features of such an approach are

- best practice captured and highly specified
- capacity built to transfer and sustain innovation across systems
- keeping the focus on the core purposes of schooling by sustaining a discourse on teaching and learning, and
- ensuring equity, through championing diversity and engaging with and promoting thriving communities.

Although evidence of effectiveness is still accumulating, it is becoming clear that networks support improvement and innovation, by enabling schools to collaborate on building curriculum diversity, extended services and professional support to develop a vision of education that is shared and owned well beyond individual school gates (Hopkins, 2022).

The four key drivers provide a core strategy for systemic improvement through building capacity whilst also raising standards of learning and achievement. It is **System Leadership** though, that adapts them to particular and individual school contexts. This is leadership that enables systemic reform to be both generic, in terms of overall strategy, and specific, in adapting to individual and particular situations. It needs to be made clear, however, that as was intimated earlier, for transformation, System Leadership needs to be reflected at three levels.

- **System Leadership at the school level** – with, at essence, principals becoming almost as concerned about the success of other schools as they are about their own.

- **System Leadership at the local/regional level** – with practical principles widely shared and used as a basis for local alignment with specific programs developed for the most at-risk groups.
- **System Leadership at the national/ state level** – with social justice, moral purpose and a commitment to the success of every learner providing the focus for transformation and collaboration system-wide.

In outlining a comprehensive approach for system and school improvement, I have in this section focused so far on system-level strategies. This has been achieved by highlighting the importance of rebalancing top-down and bottom-up change, and focusing on a relatively small number but complementary policy drivers that build capacity, as well as ensuring high standards of student outcomes.

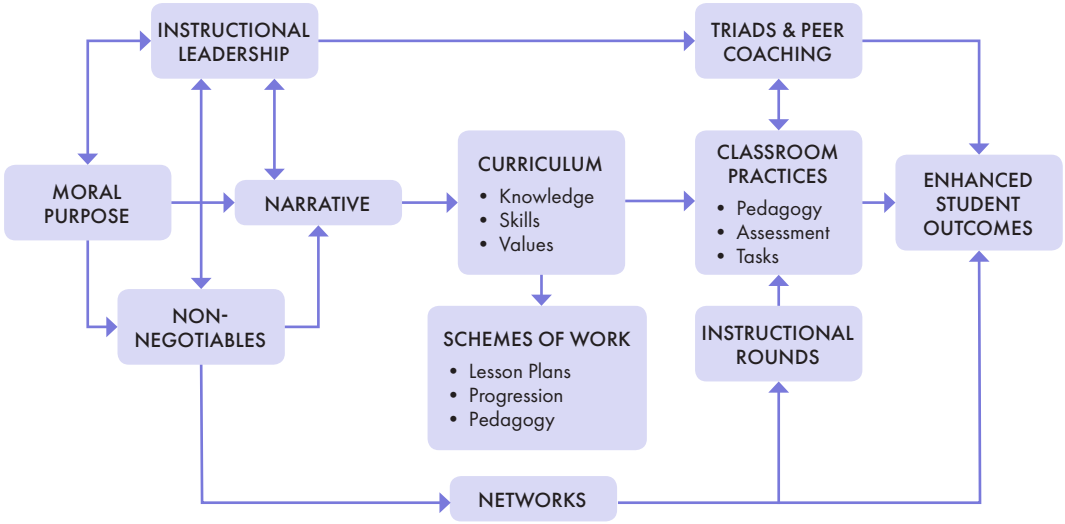
We now need to examine the necessary features of an implementation strategy at the school level.

Sir Michael Barber (2009) once memorably pointed out that one can mandate the move from awful to adequate, and fair to good, but, as one progresses, one needs to 'unleash greatness'. Taking our steer from this felicitous phrase we have recently developed a school improvement strategy that assists in 'unleashing greatness' (Hopkins, 2020). As such, it inevitably builds on our proven school improvement programs, in particular the *Improving the Quality of Education for All* and *Curiosity and Powerful Learning* (Hopkins, 2002; Hopkins and Craig, 2018a, b, c).

Unleashing Greatness presents a simple and practical approach to school improvement, based on the principles discussed in this paper and designed for schools that are currently overwhelmed by a myriad of often incompatible demands from governments, community and professional associations (Hopkins, 2020). Many schools find themselves besieged and bogged down by competing policy initiatives and external accountabilities, yet wish to chart their own distinctive way that serves to enhance the learning journeys of all their students. In the face of such innovation overload, I am reminded of the wise advice that Michael Fullan (2016) gave to our schools some years ago – just do one or two things as well as you possibly can, and then do everything else as well as you would have done anyway!

Eight steps accord with that dictum. Although the eight steps are described sequentially below, they are essentially interactive (see Figure 4). The eight steps are also just a starting point; school

Figure 4. Unleashing Greatness: An interactive model



improvement is more complex than this. They do however provide a way in and summarise many of the key ideas in school improvement research, policy and practice, many of which have been discussed earlier. The eight steps and the key evidence behind each of them are as follows.

1. **Clarify moral purpose**
   Ensure that the achievement and learning of students expressed as moral purpose is at the centre of everything the school and teachers do.

2. **Focus on classroom practice**
   The quality of a school or system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers: it is axiomatic therefore that the focus of school improvement is on the practice of teaching.

3. **Decide on the non-negotiables**
   These are the key improvement objectives that the school focuses on unrelentingly in the short/medium term, which are underpinned by a 'development' (as compared with a 'maintenance') structure that ensures adequate resources are made available for improvement work.

4. **Articulate the narrative**
   Moral purpose may be at the heart of successful school and system improvement, but we will not realise this purpose without powerful and increasingly specified strategies and protocols, embraced in a narrative that both energises and provides direction for our colleagues, students and communities.

5. **Utilise Instructional Rounds and theories of action**
   These are the key strategies for diagnosing and articulating effective teaching practice, through non-judgemental observation and the development of protocols to ensure consistency and precision.

6. **Embrace peer coaching and triads**
   Provide the infrastructure for professional development in the school and the means for putting the theories of action into practice.

7. **Practice instructional leadership**
   This is the leadership strategy most closely associated with increased levels of student achievement, through the employment of four key behaviours: setting vision; managing teaching and learning; developing people; and organisation redesign.

8. **Exploit networking**
   The most effective schools network with each other in order to learn from their best, to collaborate purposefully and to share outstanding practice.

In concluding this section, it is important to remember that the challenge of school and system reform has great moral depth to it. This is because it directly addresses the learning needs of our students, the professional growth of teachers and the enhancement of the role of the school as an agent of social change. Despite the implicit optimism of that statement, I have an increasingly uneasy feeling that neither the *Diamond of Reform* nor the *Unleashing Greatness* framework, even in combination, will meet my own test of ensuring excellence and equity in terms of student performance at the system level. Given recent events, particularly the pandemic and the current global economic downturn, I worry that whether even these strategies, in combination, are powerful enough to take us into the right-hand segment of the 'system-wide reform' diagram (Figure 2, p 16) discussed earlier. To understand why this is the case, and to point to a potential way forward, is the unenviable task I have set myself in the concluding section of this paper.

Coda: Pandemics, transformation, paradigms and emancipation

The proposition being developed in this paper is that, despite the progress in the knowledge base of school and system reform over the past fifty years or so, in terms of enhancing the progress and achievement of students, this potential is not being uniformly realised. The reason is that the wrong policy drivers are often chosen and, as a consequence, student achievement in many countries is uneven and in some cases stagnating. This problematic situation has now been compounded by the malign effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational achievement in most of the world's education systems. Yet, just as we seem to have achieved some control of the COVID virus, the world is now beset (at time of writing) by the prospect of an unprecedented global economic downturn, whose negative impact we are not yet able to fathom. This deepens the sense of unease noted in the previous paragraph.

My frustration is well captured by Ernest Becker (1985, p xviii–xix), whose wise words I first read over 40 years ago and which still inspire me today. In the preface to his posthumously published book, *Escape from Evil*, he wrote as follows.

> *As in most of my other work, I have reached far beyond my competence and have probably secured for good a reputation for flamboyant gestures. But the times still crowd me and give me no rest, and I see no way to avoid ambitious synthetic attempts; either we get some kind of grip on the accumulation of thought, or we continue to wallow helplessly, to starve amidst plenty. So, I gamble with science and write, but the game seems to me very serious and necessary.*

In his *'The Right drivers for whole system success'*, Michael Fullan (2021) reflects on what it takes to *'get some kind of grip on the accumulation of thought'* in a post pandemic educational world. The following four quotes illustrate his argument.

- *Above all, we recommend avoiding a 'loss of learning' mindset that would take us back to traditional learning – to a system that we know was not working for the vast majority of students.*
- *In short, this prolonged ambiguity (the COVID pandemic) creates a tangible opportunity to make positive change happen.*
- *One might conclude that over the past 40 years the problem is not absence of change but rather the presence of too many ad hoc, uncoordinated, ephemeral, piecemeal policies, programmes and leaders that come and go.*
- *There is little credibility in the stance that we need not change the system. We have such a chance now – a once-in-a-generation opportunity, that we dare not miss or bungle.*

Fullan's analysis is consistent with a range of other educational exhortations that are currently calling for **transformation** rather than reform. The Salzburg Statement for Education Transformation (2022) argues that reform that can result in a better version of existing systems, improvement can only be incremental. Whereas transformation begins with values and mindsets, and changes the purpose of the system. Similarly, both WISE (2022) and McKinsey (2020) call for 'reimagination' in terms of educational leadership and teaching and learning. In the same vein, the Foundation for Education Development (FED, 2022, p 5) 'flags that one of the biggest challenges to education in England is its historically short-termist approach to policy-making' and 'highlights the need for a new approach to empower politicians and education stakeholders to find solutions to long-term problems.' Many agree on the problem and share my unease. The question is what is the most productive way forward?

Fullan (2021, p 36) in '*The right drivers for whole system success*' contends that if you want system change, you have to change the system, or at least the way in which you think about the system and the values that underpin it. He reminds us of Thomas Kuhn's (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. In that seminal work, Kuhn argued that 'paradigm shifts' (alterations in the principles that govern models of thinking and action) occur under two conditions. One requirement is that the current model is patently no longer working; the second is the presence of a viable alternative. That the first condition is met is palpably true if the argument of this paper is accepted. It is with the second condition that I deviate slightly from Fullan; he argues that his 'right drivers' constitute the components of the new paradigm. There is no doubt that they are consistent with the analysis conducted in this paper, but before adopting such a strategic solution, I would like us to consider in a little more depth the nature of paradigms.

In a slightly different context Paulo Freire once memorably remarked that, *'… methodological confusion can always be related to ideological error'* (Hopkins, 2001, p 19). This is also the case with school and system improvement. We have already noted that the tension in contemporary school improvement and system reform efforts is commonly related to a tension between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up'. One can characterise these two opposing forces as follows.

Top-down = Outside In = Positivism

Positivism in terms of school improvement, as with GERM, is related to top-down initiatives designed to result in short-term measurable gains against largely politically defined criteria.

Bottom-up = Inside Out = Interpretive Approach

The **Interpretive Approach** acknowledges that reality is constructed through the meanings and actions of individuals.

The tension felt by many of the educational leaders that I work with around the world is explained by the fact that they, on the one hand, are the victims of GERM and are subjected to top-down policy forces; and, on the other, they wish to create a school culture that is driven by moral purpose and that serves the best purposes of their students (and teachers). They are caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place, and there seems to be no escape.

Neither of these broad approaches provides an entirely satisfactory basis for authentic school improvement as I defined it in *School Improvement for Real* (Hopkins, 2001) and again in this paper. Yet advocates of both the positive and the interpretative perspective assume (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, p 105) that

> *… the two positions they represent more or less exhaust the range of possible options available for educational research to adopt.*

Yet, as Carr and Kemmis (1986, p 129–130) continue, there are major objections to both approaches, insofar as

> *… the positivist idea that knowledge has a purely instrumental value in solving educational problems and the consequent tendency to see all educational issues as technical in character needs to be firmly resisted. … However, the recognition that educational theory must be grounded in the interpretations of teachers (or leaders), is not in itself sufficient.*

Fortunately there is a third approach or paradigm – 'critical theory' – that addresses both of these weaknesses. This approach originated with the 'Frankfurt School' of philosophy – a community of scholars based in that German City.

The overriding concern of the Frankfurt School (Carr and Kemmis 1986, p 130) was

> *… to articulate a view of theory that has the central task of emancipating people from the positivist 'domination of thought' through their own understandings and actions.*

In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Jürgen Habermas (1972), the favourite son of the Frankfurt School, describes the three ways in which humans know and construe the world. These, he terms 'technical,' 'practical' and 'emancipatory'. For Habermas, knowledge is the outcome of human activity that is motivated by natural needs and interests. These interests guide and shape the way knowledge is constituted in different human activities. The **technical** orientation relates to positivism, the **practical** orientation to the interpretative paradigm, and the **critical** to emancipation and transformation.

Table 2 summarises Habermas' *Tri-Paradigmatic Framework* by relating the three types of human interest to the kind of knowledge it generates and its school improvement focus. Ted Aoki (Pinar and Irwin, 2004), in particular, has applied these orientations to education, in terms of curriculum inquiry research, with insight and wisdom.

Table 2. Habermas' Tri-Paradigmatic Framework

Type of human interest	Kind of knowledge	School improvement focus
Technical – top-down Prediction and control	**Instrumental** Causal explanation and empirical knowing	Is **short term**, using bureaucratic policy options and narrow outcome measures
Practical – bottom-up Interpretation and understanding	**Practical** Understanding and giving meaning	Is on **process and culture** and on creating a harmonious school environment
Critical – transformation Critique and liberation	**Emancipatory** Critical knowing that combines reflection and action	Is **authentic**, with an emphasis on student learning, intervention and empowerment

Critical Theory

It is Critical Theory then that offers us a way out of the binary dichotomy of top-down and bottom-up, and provides the opportunity for our hard-working school principals and teachers to maximise the benefit of their vision and endeavour. Critical Theory provides the basis for a third way towards school and system improvement, in line with the argument of this paper. Critical Theory provides the architecture for the paradigm that school improvement activists need to inhabit. Let us explore the concept in a little more detail.

In his study of critical theory and its educational implications, Rex Gibson (1986, p 5–6) describes its central characteristic as follows.

> *Critical theory acknowledges the sense of frustration and powerlessness that many feel as they see their personal destinies out of their control, and in the hands of (often unknown) others … Critical theory attempts to reveal those factors that prevent groups and individuals taking control of, or even influencing, those decisions that crucially affect their lives … In the exploration of the nature and limits of power, authority and freedom, critical theory claims to afford insight into how greater degrees of autonomy could be available.*

Making available 'greater degrees of autonomy' marks out Critical Theory's true distinctiveness: its claim to be emancipatory. Not only does it provide enlightenment (deeper awareness of your true interests); more than that (indeed, because of that), it can set you free. Unlike 'scientific' theory, it claims to provide guidance as to what to do. This concept of emancipation – enabling people to exert more influence and direction over their own lives – is central to Critical Theory and to authentic school improvement.

Critical Theory provides the architecture for the paradigm that school improvement activists need to inhabit.

Space precludes a full articulation of school and system improvement strategies conceived within the Critical Theory paradigm. Hopefully this will become the focus of a further paper in this series. What I have attempted to do to this point is not only explain the frustration, anomie and sense of powerlessness that many educational leaders feel, but also provide the beginnings of a practical and strategic way forward. The notion of 'emancipation' and strategies such as Action Research to classroom research (see for example, Hopkins, 2014) are so crucial to Critical Theory that they need to become both commonplace and central to the current 'transformational' discourses on education.

Yes of course our educational systems need 'transformation', but we achieve this by a shift from the current dominant paradigm based on **Technical – top-down** approaches focused on prediction and control, to the **Critical** that values critique, liberation and emancipation.

As I move towards a conclusion, let me cite the work of Lawrence Stenhouse. It was he who led the teacher research and curriculum development movements in the UK from the late sixties through to his premature death in 1982 (see Stenhouse, 1975 and 1980). The following two quotes are taken from *Research as a Basis for Teaching* (Rudduck and Hopkins, 1985).

Stenhouse's writing was characterised by a deep curiosity about the relationship between authority and knowledge. He described the key problem as follows.

We produce through education a majority who are ruled by knowledge, not served by it – an intellectual, moral and spiritual proletariat characterized by instrumental competencies rather than autonomous power.

Stenhouse saw the solution as a process of emancipation.

My theme is an old-fashioned one – emancipation … The essence of emancipation as I conceive it is the intellectual, moral and spiritual autonomy which we recognise when we eschew paternalism and the role of authority and hold ourselves obliged to appeal to judgement.

It is the 'good society' that critical theory, emancipation and the principles of authentic school improvement eventually and ineluctably lead us towards.

There are at least four levels at which this concept of emancipation can operate: at the level of the student, the teacher, the school and the system.

- At the level of the **student**, emancipation refers to the ability to stand outside the teacher's authority on forms of knowledge, and to discover and own it for oneself. In his own work, Stenhouse was moving away from a teacher-dominated classroom to a setting where students, unconstrained by the authority of the teacher, could create meaning for themselves on the basis of evidence and discussion, and the development of their learning skills.
- The route to emancipation for the **teacher** is through adopting a research stance. There are two aspects to this: first, that research is linked to the strengthening of professional judgement and to the self-directed improvement of practice through peer coaching (Joyce and Calhoun, 2010); second, that the most important focus for research is the curriculum, in that it is the medium through which knowledge is communicated in schools.
- The knowledge we teach in **schools** is won through research; and such knowledge cannot be taught except through some form of research-based teaching and Instructional Leadership (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2019). This implies a form of learning based on enquiry rather than didacticism, a form of assessment based on problem solving rather than standardised tests, and an approach to leadership that cherishes learning and teaching.
- At the level of the **system**, as we imagine a new educational future so we require a new way of working. We need to follow the advocacy of Federation for Education Development (FED)[3], Salzburg[4] and WISE[5] as well as the technical knowledge generated by PISA (eg, Barber and Mourshed, 2007, Mourshed et al, 2010; Schleicher, 2018; Whelan, 2009). We require a different paradigm – capable of realising a future where excellence and equity are ubiquitous. Through embracing the Critical Theory paradigm and developing a coherent system reform strategy, rebalancing 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' change, the systems that we work can enhance the life chances of increasing numbers of their students.

Through maximising the power of each of these levels and ensuring their synthesis, will eventually lead towards excellence and equity being commonplace, as well as the 'good society.' It is the 'good society' that critical theory, emancipation

and the principles of authentic school improvement eventually and ineluctably lead us towards. It is fitting to finally conclude by reflecting on Amitai Etzioni's (2000) inspirational exhortation.

> *We aspire to a society that is not merely civil but is good. A good society is one in which people treat one another as ends in themselves. … as whole persons … as members of a community, bonded by ties of affection and commitment …*
>
> *The vision of a good society is a tableau on which we project our aspirations, not a full checklist of all that deserves our dedication. And the vision is often reformulated as the world around us changes, and as we change. Moreover, it points to different steps that different societies best undertake, depending on their place on the Third Way.*
>
> *The Third Way is a road that leads us toward the good society. … But this is one of the main virtues of this approach: it points to the directions that we ought to follow, but is neither doctrinaire nor a rigid ideological system.*

Endnotes

1 Dissemination Efforts Supporting School Improvement.

2 Improving the Quality of Education for All (UK).

3 The FED is dedicated to promoting a long-term vision and plan for education in England.

4 See Salzburg Global Seminar (2022).

5 World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) is an international initiative aimed at transforming education through innovation. WISE was established by Qatar Foundation in 2009 under the patronage of its chairperson, Sheikha Moza bint Nasser. Wikipedia.

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About the author

Professor David Hopkins is currently Chair of Educational Leadership at the University of Bolton, as well as being Professor Emeritus at the Institute of Education, University College London and the University of Nottingham. David is passionately committed to improving the quality of education for all and has worked at the intersection of policy, research and practice for over forty years. Among a range of educational roles, he has been Chief Adviser to three Secretaries of State on School Standards in the UK, Dean of Education at the University of Nottingham, and a secondary school teacher, as well as an Outward Bound instructor and international mountain guide, he has also consulted widely on school reform in over twenty educational systems globally. David completed his school improvement trilogy with the publication of *Exploding the Myths of School Reform*; the previous books being *School Improvement for Real* (2001) and *Every School a Great School* (2007). He was recently ranked as the 16th most influential educator in the world by the American-based Global Gurus organisation. Visit profdavidhopkins.com

About the paper

The author outlines a brief history of educational change and the evolution of school improvement as a series of phases; considers some of the most relevant critiques of policy and practice; and summarises the current knowledge base as a series of 'myths', with associated theories of action for implementation. He then presents an overarching framework, together with practical examples of strategies for system and school improvement that build on contemporary best practice. Finally he explores factors currently preventing school improvement policy and practice from ensuring excellence and equity; discusses approaches for transformation; and proposes a shift in paradigm, based on critical theory.

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