

## Introduction

Teaching is a profession of hope. We are driven by desires - for our students to discover a taste for learning, a feel for justice and care for each other. We aspire to turn children into thoughtful, creative and concerned citizens. Inspiring teachers are motivated by their dreams of a better world.

The desire to improve education arises naturally from our engagement with the future. We recognise material limitations, but cannot allow ourselves to be half-hearted. Good teachers are never satisfied with dull environments, hostile relationships, and methods that bore or confuse.

School improvement is integral to a teacher's professionalism. It is an expression of our hope for better schools and better lives. It rejects the cynicism which blames children for their lack of success; it refuses a sociological determinism which says simply that the poor are *bound* to fail. As a new field of study and set of practices, it has focused valuable attention on the positive factors which enhance learning, in schools as institutions and cultures.

School improvement has attracted a weighty literature and a throng of enthusiasts, but also much anxiety. We need to ask why, for many teachers, School Improvement (with capital letters now, almost hyphenated) seems like an alien force imposed from outside and above. It is too easy to write off teachers' genuine concerns as signs of idleness or indifference to the plight of young learners, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Conversely some critics of the School Improvement project seem to suggest that improvements are just a trick with mirrors. Both responses serve to polarise and freeze discussion.

I wish to make clear from the start my hope for better schools. I have seen inspiring evidence of schools which are making a real difference to children's futures and the life of the whole community. I have experienced inner-city schools which are vibrant with hope in the midst of poverty. This book arises not from any doubts about the possibility of improvement, and certainly not about its necessity, but from serious misgivings about the current agenda for change. *Schools of Hope* invites a new direction in theory and practice.

School Improvement has developed a sophisticated understanding of leadership and change management, but for all its talk of vision and values, it has given little thought to the purpose of education and has largely neglected social justice. Consequently, it has not been able to challenge some of the superficial and misdirected advice from government agencies and a regime of accountability which is profoundly inequitable in its discourse and its effects. We not only have to engage in a scrutiny of School Improvement as academic literature but also to confront it as a nexus of mutually reinforcing policies, structures and actions. Among other consequences:

- it creates illusions of being able to overcome the problems of an increasingly polarised society through education alone
- it actively penalises those who are teaching and learning in marginalised communities
- it trivialises learning, making it increasingly difficult to challenge injustice and understand the powerful global forces which structure our lives
- it limits the scope of teachers to develop meaningful learning for working-class and ethnic minority pupils, or indeed any pupils who have difficulty in learning
- it deprofessionalises teachers, undermining the collegiality and reflection needed for real change, while giving headteachers illusory power within a wider game in which they are simply dancing to someone else's tune.

In England especially - a testbed since the early nineties – School Improvement is in deep crisis; it has become associated with a high-stress efficiency drive marked by increasing attainment gaps, superficial learning and disaffection among teachers and pupils alike. While academic experts speak increasingly of distributed leadership and transforming school cultures, government agencies reinforce the top-down pressures of accountability and surveillance. Under pressure from the dominant agenda for improvement, issues such as active citizenship and social inclusion are marginalised.

It is over ten years now since Jean Rudduck said we should talk less about the *management* of change and more about the *meaning* of change (Rudduck 1991). This neatly encapsulates much of the present difficulty. Improvement should be an ethical project, not just a technical one. This is clearly signalled by the frequent use of words such as *mission*, *vision* and

*values* in the literature, yet somehow a discourse has been constructed which hollows out these words.

Effective schooling and the school improvement movement is blind to a searching interrogation of outcome. Test scores become ends... Explicit discussions of values and the types of society to which schools articulate / adhere are ignored. (Slee and Weiner 1998:111)

### **Widening the horizons**

For school leaders working in Britain, it is all too easy to assume that one particular model of improvement is universal. England suffers particularly from a dominant version of School Improvement which has been grafted on to the statistically-based School Effectiveness paradigm. This model is well matched to an education system based on strong centralised control over state-funded schools which enjoy a notional autonomy within a competitive market - the product of Thatcher and Baker's Education Reform Act of 1988. The Anglo-American model of School Improvement has had some influence elsewhere, including parts of Australia, Hong Kong, Taiwan and to some extent the Netherlands, though even in Scotland and parts of Canada and the USA it is heavily contested. In England, where this model receives powerful government support, the situation is pregnant with contradiction – oppressive surveillance alongside breathtaking innovation, demoralisation undermining dedication, an official discourse which muddles 'pressure and support', education ministers who talk inclusion while stigmatising inner-city schools.

One of the greatest ironies is that such great concern is expressed about low achieving schools, but so little real attention given to understanding the dynamics of education and improvement in locations of dire poverty. I choose this word, rather than sheltering behind the euphemism of low socioeconomic status, to emphasise that nearly one in three children in Britain are being brought up in poverty. In some areas, it is far worse – half the pupils in inner London schools are now growing up below the poverty line. The situation is particularly severe in Britain and America, but occurs in other developed countries. The core texts of School Improvement have, in practice, largely marginalised this issue, and the relationship between underachievement and poverty remains inadequately researched and poorly theorised.

The all-pervasive Improvement project in England and Wales over the last decade has done nothing to narrow the attainment gap between rich and poor. Indeed, a name and shame culture has made life intolerable for

teachers in troubled areas. Despite the constant pressure to raise targets, and the political rhetoric that ‘poverty is no excuse’, official data confirms the near impossibility, under the present regime, for schools in poorer areas even to reach the national average (OfSTED 2000). We are far from properly understanding what to do about this, though I will argue that the task is impossible within the current policy straightjacket.

In an earlier book, *The Power to Learn*, I explored the hypothesis that what really drives improvement in schools serving marginalised inner-city communities is not the mechanisms of top-down control but a culture of *empowerment*. This can be seen operating in the interlinking spheres of teaching and learning, curriculum, school ethos, relationships with parents and the wider community, and school development processes. Through ten case studies of successful schools with large numbers of bilingual pupils of mainly South Asian heritage, I was able to trace a socially critical discourse and practice which actively challenged disadvantage and discrimination. Each of the headteachers and the many other leaders in these schools have a sense of educational vision that is rooted in a cultural, social and political understanding of their environment. (Wrigley 2000)

Despite the top-down control of the official discourse, thoughtful school leaders seek to develop collegiality and reflection in their schools and connect their educational vision to a social understanding. They struggle on a daily basis to make sense of the unspoken contradictions in the sea of advice that buffets them. They may survive by cherry-picking good ideas and quotations, but the appearance that school improvement experts are somehow singing in harmony is confusing. An honest debate would be healthier and more enlightening.

We would also benefit from opening our horizons. The Scandinavian emphasis on education for democracy has led to very different models of evaluation, leadership and development. In transatlantic collaboration, the editorial team of Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (Canada) Ann Lieberman (USA) and David Hopkins (England) significantly chose to name their two-volume anthology *International Handbook of Educational Change* (1998). It includes a section labelled School Improvement, but this is located within wider perspectives around the (mainly) English-speaking world. Similar breadth of vision is shown in the *Handbook of School Development (Handbuch zur Schulentwicklung*, Altrichter, Schley and Schratz eds. 1998). I am not suggesting that other education systems are unaffected by a globalising trend towards greater control of schools and the amoral ideology of economic rationalism, but even a scan of the

chapter headings of these books indicates a greater understanding of the connection between theories of school development, pedagogy, human development and social justice than characterises most English texts.

In Germany, a strategic conference *Future of education – school of the future* (Bildungskommission NRW 1995) is having enduring influence in many schools. The language is radically different from the lists of ‘key characteristics’ of ‘effective schools’, or even the process models of much school improvement literature. The conference’s final declaration begins with a vision of future schools:

### **School is a House of Learning**

- a place where everybody is welcome, where learners and teachers are accepted in their individuality
- a place where people are allowed time to grow up, to take care of one another and be treated with respect
- a place whose rooms invite you to stay, offer you the chance to learn, and stimulate you to learn and show initiative
- a place where diversions and mistakes are allowed, but where evaluation in the form of feedback gives you a sense of direction
- a place for intensive work, and where it feels good to learn
- a place where learning is infectious.

This agenda for improvement begins with a rich sense of vision and values, rather than a one-dimensional focus on examination results.

These are not the only models. Thomas Sergiovanni (1999) argues the importance of building schools as communities, rather than bureaucratic or market models of schooling in which low-trust mechanisms for improvement result in short-term superficial change. Per Dalin (1998), one of the most experienced writers on wide-scale reform, derives an agenda for school improvement by looking at the dramatic social and technological change currently taking place. Paulo Freire’s enduring influence in Latin America and elsewhere should not be underestimated either.

### **A grounded hope**

To some readers it may seem strange to use the concept of *hope* as a leading principle for a book on school improvement. We are used to models of science - in social sciences too - which claim objectivity by denying subjectivity. Imitating a positivist discourse from the physical sciences,

we strip our writing of emotion and identity to make it more ‘theoretical’. Such ‘objectivity’ is difficult to sustain in discussions of educational change; the personal histories, narratives of lived events, emotional crises and political beliefs push up like wild flowers between the flagstones.

I recently re-read Christopher’s Hill’s account of the growth of science and technology in the period leading to the English Revolution of the 1640s. Francis Bacon is often portrayed as the father of a modern scientific paradigm which is ruthlessly instrumental and denies moral values. In reality his historic role was much more to relate the project of scientific advance to a progressive moral purpose. Reacting against the pessimism and timeless truths of the medieval world-view, he believed that scientific method would help liberate mankind from the consequences of ‘the Fall’. He hoped for ‘a restitution and reinvigorating (in great part) of man to the sovereignty and power... which he had in his first state of creation’. For Bacon, the pursuit of knowledge was an act of charity. Knowledge should not be sought as...

a couch, whereupon to rest a searching and restless spirit; or a terrace, for a wandering and variable mind to walk up and down with a fair prospect; or a tower of state for a proud mind to raise itself upon; or a fort or commanding ground, for strife and contention; or a shop for profit and sale. [It should be] a rich storehouse, for the glory of the Creator, and the relief of man’s estate. (Hill 1965:89-94)

Present-day ecologists are no less scientific for their passionate commitment; critics of globalisation do not lose their theoretical edge when they speak to a wide public. Conversely, when natural and social scientists are silent on issues of morality and politics, they often allow their work to be abused by the very forces they are too polite to mention.

By hope, I do not mean a rosy optimism, an emotional inner glow. That would be difficult indeed at this time. I mean a grounded hope which arises out of a full recognition of material and social needs and possibilities. As educators, we need a hope which dares to confront our troubled world.

To adopt a purely technical discourse of school improvement is not just a question of style, it is a political choice. When school improvers fail to address the context and goals of education, their project becomes a mere efficiency drive. We must keep asking ‘to what ends?’ and ‘for whose benefit?’

The question of educational aims lies at the heart of any real understanding of improvement. How can we know if schools are improving unless

we decide what they should be good for? The problem has become even more acute in the aftermath of 11 September 2001. Struggling to put together an editorial for the journal *Improving Schools* in the week after a major peace demonstration in my city, I wrote as follows:

The normal concerns of this journal seem lightweight compared with the far-reaching consequences of 11 September. The murderous demolition of the Twin Towers; the world's most powerful president launching a 'crusade' against enemies yet to be named; the world plunged into a war which some US politicians threaten may last 50 years...

There is discussion everywhere, as the young (and not so young) surge forward to question and debate – an unexpected education. Young people everywhere (the 'apathetic generation'?) are asking difficult questions, making new connections – why sanctions are killing Iraqi children, what leads to the blind anger of terrorism, what are cluster bombs, the geopolitics of oil in Central Asia, the tentacles of globalised power, the World Trade Organisation, Third World debt, religion, hunger, civilisation, peace.

This puts into a new perspective our brave attempts to improve our schools. We have devoted such energy to developing a sophisticated knowledge of change management, planning, assessment, school cultures, leadership. Now, in this new century, the question is unavoidably – *to what end, all this? Where is the vision?*

'Economic rationalism' (which is, of course, not entirely separate from other features of globalisation) is facing a growing international critique. Much of the high-level government interest in school improvement has led to an intensification of teaching, accountability, league tables, teachers feeling deprofessionalised and disenchanted (or leaving), a relentless drive for more though not always better – and silence on the question of *educational purpose*.

What really matters: new targets to meet? higher maths grades perhaps? or caring and creative learners, a future, a sense of justice, the welfare of the planet and its people?

Improvement built on hope reaches out, unblinkered, to a fast-changing and troubled world; it has a concreteness and specificity which neutral discussions of change management cannot touch. To examine school improvement using the touchstone of *hope* is not a vaguely utopian moralism but an attempt to reconnect to core issues. Hope is a principle which unites the actions and aspirations of teachers, parents, children

and headteachers. It enables us to understand ‘high expectations’ not as top-down numerical targets but as educational and political challenges within specific social contexts. It articulates connections between the five key areas of school development, curriculum, pedagogy, ethos and the wider community which school leaders need to align in order to bring about significant change.

This book is necessarily theoretical as well as practical; it moves between sharp critique and inspirational examples of practice. Theoretical debate helps to dispel confusion and clarify action. It may appear negative for the early chapters to develop a critique of the dominant paradigms of School Effectiveness and School Improvement and the accompanying practices of accountability and performance management, but this is needed to clear the fog. A theoretical response to current policy directions and taken-for-granted practices will hopefully strengthen resistance.

Recent research into school leadership processes and change management has brought valuable new understandings, but it can lead to confusion when divorced from an analysis of the wider environment. Educational change does not occur in a vacuum. Many school leaders try hard to make coherent sense of a plethora of advice, seeking to assimilate diverse and contradictory messages as if they were somehow additive. They struggle to reconcile inspirational quotations from Fullan with the government’s latest dose of top-down directives and target setting. Understandably, many headteachers are finding it hard to disentangle the unacknowledged contradictions or to navigate the political cross-currents.

My hope is to provide some greater coherence to our understanding of improvement, to disentangle the weeds from the daisies, to relate school change to what is happening in the wider world, and to facilitate communication among a professional community with its heart set on a better future. It will draw upon fields of educational study which mainstream school improvement studies have tended to overlook.

### **Outline of chapters**

The first section, *Critiques*, questions the assumptions behind current orthodoxy. Chapter 1 *School effectiveness – the problem of reductionism* analyses the attempt to subsume educational evaluation within the hard science of statistics. Research which seeks to use statistical correlation to identify why some schools are more ‘effective’ is often assumed to provide a common-sense foundation for the Improvement project. I believe it is methodologically flawed, presents an oversimplified view of the



social context of schools, and avoids questions of educational and social values. The chapter includes references to alternative examples of quantitative research which are sidelined because they are politically off message.

Chapter 2 *School improvement – where do we go from here?* begins a critique of the dominant model of School Improvement which is grounded in the ideological foundations of School Effectiveness. England in particular has been its testbed for the past ten years. Government agencies claim to base their recommendations on sound academic theory, though in practice official policy bears only a superficial relationship to the best available research on change processes, extracting from it only what suits. The chapter examines the anti-democratic consequences of following this dominant model, arguing for a more conscious sense of social and educational direction, in theory and in practice.

The next section, *Dilemmas*, moves the discussion forward by examining school improvement in relation to school cultures and structures. Chapter 3 *Commitment or surveillance: the ecology of change* contrasts developmental cultures based on engaged professionalism with the low-trust accountability regimes which stifle initiative and undermine morale. It calls for a reculturing of schools through empowered and creative leadership at all levels.

Chapter 4 *Whose improvement? whose schools?* highlights the dangers when School Improvement ignores major policy shifts. England's New Labour politicians now disparage the very idea of comprehensive schools, and engage in modernisation plans which always seems to involve privatising. The privatisation of essential public services is, of course, being vigorously promoted across the world by the lead agencies of finance capital, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and the gulf between rich and poor is deepening. This chapter asks why these questions are overlooked by improvers who try to stay uncontroversial. It looks at educational initiatives in various parts of the world which are more consciously political.

The third section *Learning* opens a discussion of issues which have been virtually neglected in the school improvement literature, despite their central relevance to raising expectations. Chapter 5 *Raising expectations - rethinking 'intelligence'* questions the assumptions behind our understanding of individual ability. It examines the history of intelligence testing and other practices and concepts which serve to deny the educational potential of working class and ethnic minority children, including theories of language deficit. It highlights the relevance for school

improvement of newer models of ability, including the concepts of multiple and distributed intelligence.

Chapter 6 *Curriculum, class and culture* questions the rigidity of the imposed curriculum. It explores alternative models of curriculum in terms of their social values and political orientations. This chapter raises fundamental issues for educational achievement in inner-city schools, drawing on initiatives from the USA and Australia.

Chapter 7 *Pedagogies for improving schools* questions the emphasis on transmission models of direct teaching, and highlights the potential of recent developments in constructivist pedagogy. It draws upon research about classroom communications and thinking skills.

Chapter 8 *Schools for citizens* further develops the themes of curriculum, pedagogy and social power, and the relationship between education for citizenship and school improvement. It argues for opportunities to negotiate curriculum with young people, and to reconnect learning with action.

The fourth section, *Communities*, looks at the complex relationships between schools and their environments, and the contradictory support for social inclusion at national policy level. In much of the advice on school improvement, a one-way relationship is assumed between teachers and parents, and parental participation is limited to ensuring that children attend school and do their homework. Chapter 9 *Communities of learning* explores the social experience provided by schools, and examines the potential for real involvement of parents in the school and for learning in the community.

Chapter 10 *Social justice - or a discourse of deficit?* questions the neglect of a debate about social justice in mainstream School Improvement literature. It re-examines the Improvement project in the light of theories of equity and inclusion, around a range of issues (poverty, special educational needs, school exclusions, bilingualism, gender, racism and refugees) and emphasises the importance of overcoming discourses of deficit which ascribe problems to marginalised groups and individuals while leaving institutional structures intact.

The concluding section, *Futures*, has a single chapter: *Schools for a future*. It points to new directions for school improvement in the light of technological and social change, developing understandings of teaching and learning, and an ethic of social justice and human rights.