

Chapter 2

School Improvement – where do we go from here?

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)

Part of the problem with words like ‘effectiveness’ and ‘improvement’ is that no one could possibly disagree. To ask an audience of headteachers whether they would like to improve their schools is like asking them whether they are in favour of personal hygiene or being kind to animals.

This is precisely the reason why we need to examine the use of words which, through their seepage into everyday common sense, have so successfully pervaded our public space. The demand that we improve or become more effective discursively underpins the operations of an entire education system. We are looking at a discourse, or rather a *discursive practice* which connects research, policy, and administration to a degree which has begun to exclude alternative ways of thinking.

Words develop meanings in particular historical and social contexts. We need to explore the specific meaning which ‘improvement’ is acquiring today, and particularly in English, whose education system is virtually a testbed for a particular model of educational change.

Thinking seriously about educational aims is a reflective process involving historical, psychological, social and philosophical understanding. It is many years since Harold Silver raised the issue of what we mean by ‘a good school’? We cannot make sense of improvement unless we can decide what *better* means.

Good schools have... trained girls to be good wives and mothers or... boys to serve the commercial ethic or the Empire. Good has been an infinitely adaptable epithet, used of schools of many kinds by interested parties of many kinds. (in Riley and MacBeath 1998)

We need to interrogate such obvious words as *achievement*, digging below the surface of taken-for-granted meanings. OfSTED (the inspection agency for England and Wales) distinguished between the words achievement and attainment, defining the latter as the subset of achievement which could be tested. This helpfully served to acknowledge that many worthwhile achievements could not be measured. Unhelpfully, of course, OfSTED privileged the attainments while marginalising other kinds of achievement.

A few years ago, I tried to articulate a broad but situated concept of achievement' for bilingual communities such as the young Pakistani Muslims I had worked with in Rochdale, England:

We need young people who are skilled tabla players and computer users, who enjoy Asian films and Western books, who are able to lead themselves and their communities forward through change and storm and a calm sea, who are socially aware and morally committed and no one's fool. We need a very wide definition of achievement. (Wrigley 1997)

This is not to underestimate the importance of exam success: ethnic minority school leavers desperately need certificates as testimony to their intelligence and potential in the face of racist assumptions which still permeate our culture. Similarly, teenagers growing up in poverty on housing schemes need formal qualifications to overcome the prejudice of employers who shortlist by postcode.

Academic qualifications are crucial, but they are not enough. In fact, one of the conclusions I reached during the fieldwork for *The Power To Learn* (Wrigley 2000) was that schools serving marginalised communities cannot raise attainment without promoting and celebrating achievement in the widest sense. Besides, without a broader personal, social and cultural development, the working class or minority youngster would go out into the world unable to deal with its challenges.

School Improvement – a contradictory development

Substantial advances have been made since 1990 in understanding the processes by which schools improve. From early mechanistic attempts to apply a list of key characteristics of effective schools or generate tick lists of managerial actions, a more organic understanding of process has

developed. In its exploration of school culture, distributed leadership, complexity theory and school self-evaluation, School Improvement is infinitely more illuminating than ten years ago. There are however some key problems which we need to face up to.

According to David Hopkins (2001:56), probably its most expert theorist and advocate, School Improvement distinguishes itself from School Effectiveness through:

- a ‘bottom-up’ orientation in which improvement is owned by the individual school and its staff
- a qualitative orientation to research methodology
- a concern with changing organisational processes rather than the outcomes of the school
- a concern to treat educational outcomes as not ‘given’ but problematic
- a concern to see schools as dynamic institutions requiring extended study more than ‘snapshot’ cross sectional studies.

Much depends on the fourth of these points. In his editorial introduction to a section of the International Handbook of Educational Change, Hopkins defines school improvement as follows:

a distinct approach to educational change that enhances student outcomes as well as strengthening the school’s capacity for managing change. (1998:1036)

Hopkins may have intended a broad definition of ‘outcomes’. The problem is that a narrower definition so permeates educational policy at the present time that, in the absence of an explicit challenge, ‘student outcomes’ is inevitably understood in terms of basic skills and examination grades. If this is all we mean by outcomes, then school improvement is trapped within the limited purposes of school effectiveness; and simply adding the term ‘capacity for managing change’ compounds rather than removes the problem.

This problem permeates so much of the current literature on school improvement. Experienced writers within the field unwittingly fall back on language which suggest a narrow set of aims, such as the argument that more autocratic leadership has largely failed to ‘deliver instructional improvement’, ‘focus upon the improvement of instruction and student performance’ and ‘improve student learning outcomes’ (Harris 2002:2).

(I deliberately cite Alma Harris and David Hopkins in this chapter, as two of the most influential and experienced leaders within the field of School Improvement in England, and researchers to whom we owe a

great deal. If we climb on the shoulders of giants, we can see that much further.)

We cannot develop our understanding of the school improvement project without reference to the wider political situation. Helen Gunter (2001:19) contrasts ‘the neo-liberal version of the performing school’ with ‘the performing school [which is] concerned with the ideas and practice of democracy’.

In the former:

Education is a product and service to be marketed, bought and sold, as the most efficient and effective way of organising and meeting consumer needs. The purposes of schools and schooling are to enable the workforce to be appropriately skilled to operate in the current and developing economy.

whereas in the latter:

Education is a public good, it is an entitlement and promotes equity. The purposes of schools and schooling are to educate as well as train, and to enable children to engage in the theory and practice of what it means to be a citizen in an unfolding and reforming democracy project.

While much of the school improvement literature acknowledges the limiting characteristics of the neo-liberal environment, it significantly fails to challenge them. Structural problems such as greater central control, the punitive regime of inspections, marketisation and the illusion of the quick fix are sometimes mentioned in the early pages of a text and then forgotten.

Hopkins (2001:21-24) provides a theoretical key to understanding the tensions within school improvement by drawing upon Habermas’ model of the ‘three ways in which humans know and construe the world’ (Aoki’s adaptation) – the *technical*, *practical* and *emancipatory*.

- i. An empirical-analytic (technical) orientation has an interest in efficiency, certainty and predictability; understands in terms of facts; and seeks technical control of the world. (Though Hopkins associates this with a ‘short term’ school improvement focus ‘using bureaucratic policy options and narrow outcome measures’, it also fits the school effectiveness paradigm.)
- ii. A situational interpretative orientation attempts to understand the social world in terms of the meanings people give to situations, of authentic intersubjective understanding. Reality is ‘inter-subjectively constituted’ and explanation involves ‘striking a resonant chord by clarifying motives, common meanings and authentic

experiences'. (Hopkins correctly identifies this with recent trends in school improvement, a focus on process and culture.)

- iii. Finally, a critical orientation seeks to improve the human condition by uncovering 'tacit assumptions' and initiating a liberating process of transformation.

It is here that Hopkins' conclusion becomes most questionable. He locates as (iii) school improvement which is 'authentic', which emphasises 'student learning, intervention and empowerment'. Such a vague definition really does not provide a sound foundation for building a socially-critical version of school improvement, which, in Habermas' model, would require us to think beyond the frame of common sense assumptions by scrutinising the political interests behind an hegemonic view of reality.

Helen Gunter (2001: 73) argues that 'transformational leadership', in its current usage, is not really transformational. She cites Gerald Grace's argument (1995) that 'the current model of charismatic transformational leadership lacks the necessary radicalism needed to pursue issues of equity' (Gunter 2001:41). Transformational change would entail a challenge to the role of schooling in reproducing the unjust power structures of our world. This would require us to rethink curriculum, pedagogies and the undemocratic relationships and structures in which pupils are socialised. The dominant trend in the school improvement literature is to stop short of such a political challenge, though there are some signs that we may now be edging towards a paradigm shift.

Distributed leadership

In *The Power to Learn*, I emphasised the importance of shared leadership.

This is not to imply that the headteacher is unimportant. In all these schools, the head has played a determining role in making the school what it is today. It is simply that many other individuals have also played important leadership roles, and the success must be attributed to all the players... It is vital to effective school development that the relationships and structures encourage the emergence and practice of leadership and creativity in different quarters. (Wrigley 2000:159-161)

There has recently been increasing focus on this concept, a development which Alma Harris and others are currently taking forward under the rubric of 'distributed leadership'. This is seen as inherently democratic, challenging the 'dualism of leader and led' (Harris 2002: 3).

Distributed leadership therefore means multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organisation, made coherent through a common culture. (Harris 2002:4 citing Elmore)

We need to question the concept more critically or it will underachieve on its democratic potential. When we study quotations from some of the headteachers cited in this same paper, we see how easy it is to slide into a different interpretation:

To be confident in your own ability to delegate tasks and know they will be done... to allow people to lead and not to try and control everything yourself.

You set the way forward, lead by example, communicate what needs to be done and have to be hands on in the way you want it achieved... it doesn't always have to be you doing the leading.

This is precisely the problem identified by writers such as Helen Gunter:

Shared leadership is functionally downwards. It is about getting teaching and learning done, measured and made visible in externally determined ways... Middle management [is] responsibility shifted down the line ... within the school. (Gunter 2001: 111 summarising Grace 1995)

Opportunities to lead have traditionally been in the gift of the headteacher as a 'leader of leaders' (from Day 1995:126) ... The distribution of work has been conceptualised on the premise of avoiding potential headteacher overload. Increasingly the neo-Taylorist approach to getting new tasks done efficiently and effectively has been given a new-wave gloss in which delegation is the means through which individuals in teams can learn and develop. (Gunter 2001:131)

She goes so far as to suggest that even headteachers have become more like middle managers, despite the promises of empowerment through delegated management:

The mandated models of school leadership... are not about educational leadership but about enabling the leadership to be a middle manager to both implement and be accountable for centrally directed policy... Educationalists and communities were sold site-based performance management on the grounds that it would enable more participation to identify and meet local needs, and yet local priorities have had to take a back seat while centrally determined agendas have been implemented. (ibid: 148-9)

Meanwhile, teachers are being proletarianized through 'the separation of design from implementation combined with work intensification' (ibid:145) while being engaged in a spurious collegiality.

The neo-liberal version of the performing school requires teachers and students to be followers, but to feel good about it... Teachers talk about 'pseudo participation' where views are sought as a ritual rather than a sincere attempt to listen and take note... Development planning is more about allocating tasks and responsibility than it is about asking questions about how and why things are what they are, and how they have come to be. (ibid:122-3)

The problems of the education system have been laid at the door of teachers while their capacity for finding solutions has been taken away. The rhetoric has been of empowerment, participation and teams, but the reality is that teachers have had to continue to do what they have always done – be empowered to do what they have been told to do. (Gunter 2001:144)

This is precisely the form of 'contrived collegiality' identified by Andy Hargreaves (1994), where the agenda is always set by powerful others. That is why we need to engage in a philosophical analysis of key terms, and a critical engagement informed by clarity of purpose.

Theorising about power enables us to engage in discussions about influence, authority, dependency, manipulation, resistance, support, interests and legitimacy. (ibid:136)

Schools are storehouses of distributed knowledge; it frequently governs the micropolitics of the organization... The collective memory of this institution is located everywhere in it; there is, then, a need for careful storage, access to, and retrieval of this collective memory. This respects the person-centredness of schools; all the participants in the school can make a knowledge contribution to the school; leadership equates with dispersed, distributed leadership... The notion of distributed intelligence and information has huge implications, for it argues against hierarchical and bureaucratic command-and-control approaches to management and leadership and, instead, argues for the realization that systems are more fittingly conceived to be networks (just as the brain is a series of neural networks) – loosely coupled or more tightly coupled. (Morrison 2002:19)

In particular, teachers need to reassert their right to debate the purposes of education. Shared leadership, in a fully democratic sense, is more than mere delegation; it involves a range of voices being heard, perspectives being shared, conflicting interpretations of reality debated. It involves not only participating in finding the solutions, but in having a right to

argue about what is the problem. Above all else, successful distributed leadership in inner city schools means giving voice to those who originate from, or have an understanding of, the local communities and who are engaged in making curriculum meaningful to students. It is a form of distributed cognition (see Perkins 1992) in which the combined experience and awareness adds up to more than the parts, and diverse perspectives are needed to lead development.

Finally, leadership, at all levels, must be based on moral and political values. This means rather more than just a dedication to higher standards and improving school ethos; it has to engage with social justice and the real-life dilemmas facing the students. In successful multiethnic schools, Maud Blair and colleagues (1998) found headteachers and others who :

- gave a strong and determined lead on equal opportunities
- empathised with the political and social factors which affected the lives of their students
- listened to and learnt from students and their parents
- tried to see things from the students' point of view
- created careful links with local communities.

Understanding school cultures

One of the greatest advances in school improvement research has been the focus on school cultures.

School cultures... are dynamic and created through the interactions of people. They are a nexus of shared norms and values that express how people make sense of the organization in which they work and the other people with whom they work.

Although powerfully visible through various symbolic processes, organizational culture is often taken for granted by current participants in an organization who may be unaware how a particular culture has been constructed, how it might or can be changed or how it is sustained by those people in positions of power and authority. (Busher 2001: 76)

The culture of an organization, then, is a construct made up of a range of expectations about what are proper and appropriate actions... This raises two very important questions... where the expectations that define legitimate action come from and how they become part of the assumptive worlds of each organizational member. (Bennett 2001: 107-9)

School cultures are highly contested. School improvement cannot be understood by focusing on internal processes alone but require us to look at the interaction between internal and external cultures. The dominant ideas and values within the wider society, the principles which permeate the macro-political culture, are not only transmitted downwards through a management hierarchy, but permeate our general consciousness as discourse, thus entering into our assumptive worlds.

There is, within each school, a contest of different voices, which is what makes school development so interesting. Indeed, it is this that makes school development *possible*. The voice of teachers who insist upon challenging inequality, tedium, and superficial or irrelevant learning is a powerful force for change, despite attempts to silence it. The voice of the local community, carried by staff (teachers and assistants) who are in tune with its problems and aspirations, is crucial to the successful development of multiethnic and other urban schools.

Youth cultures are often seen as an obstacle to school achievement, and may have this effect. It is certainly true that a commercial culture framed by instant gratification and bought pleasures makes young people impatient with school learning. At the same time, we cannot simply turn our backs. (Paradoxically, as Jane Kenway reminded the ICSEI Conference, Toronto 2001, the same corporate forces which are culturing children as consumers are turning schools into 'pleasure-free zones' through high-stakes testing, an imposed curriculum and transmission teaching.)

The conflicts that arise from the gap between dominant school cultures, on the one hand, and the crises of children growing up in poverty, dealing with racism or the life choices offered by mass media, on the other, can lead to a dysfunctional disengagement of adolescents from learning. The challenge for school improvers is to find creative ways of engaging with the various cultures and interests at work, and to develop a learning culture which supports achievement and social development within this context.

It is time for school improvement research to develop a more contextual and critical sense of the dynamism and contradictions of culture formation in schools. Whereas the dominant version sees cultural leadership as an homogenising force, effectively co-opting teachers into the government's view of successful schooling, creative and responsive school development requires a vision forged out of the many voices of staff, students and communities. The monocultural version of the good school has not proved very helpful in the inner-city or in the outer-ring housing schemes.

It's a myth that parents don't care about their children's education. They do, but often they don't know how to engage with it. We have had to take the initiative and make extra efforts to be accessible. We've worked with other agencies to run family literacy projects. We've persuaded the community centre to put on workshops to help parents help their children. We've recently been talking about targeting 20 year olds, older brothers and sisters who were once our students, and are therefore better placed than their parents to help the current students.

We don't tolerate a macho street culture. We've established a pride in the school... This hasn't meant cutting ourselves off from the real world. In fact, our school values are very close to the values of the home, and particularly the Asian communities. We draw on that kinship-based value system. Our set of values is really very simple: respect, family and achievement. (Linda Woolley, headteacher, in Wrigley 2000:88)

School improvement requires a more political and situated exploration of culture than we have managed so far, and specifically in relation to demands for greater democracy and the achievement of real success in inner city schools. For example:

- exploring the differences between authoritarian and cooperative cultures, including developing new rituals for cooperative and democratic learning (see Petersen 2001)
- examining the cultural significance of alienated forms of learning, in which, like factory work, you are told what to write and then hand over your product not to an interested audience but to the teacher-as-examiner, for token payment in the form of a mark or grade
- questioning the culture of target setting and surveillance which regulates the lives of pupils and teachers, and exploring more democratic forms of educational responsibility than the present accountability culture
- examining the cultural messages of classrooms which are dominated by the teacher's voice, closed questions and rituals of transmission of superior wisdom
- developing a better understanding of cultural difference, in order to prevent high levels of exclusion
- understanding how assumptions about ability and intelligence are worked out in classroom interactions

- discovering how assumptions about single parents, ethnic minorities and ‘dysfunctional’ working class families operate symbolically in classroom interactions.

(These issues will be developed in later chapters.)

School improvement, democracy and social justice

School improvement, as a research paradigm, policy mode, and set of practices, did not develop in a vacuum or simply from the good intentions of dedicated teachers. Its recent emergence can be located within a political configuration involving:

- demands for greater competitiveness within a global market
- the marketisation - and increasingly, privatisation - of schooling
- the development of a ‘disciplinary’ regime (inspections, performance pay etc) which harnesses teachers to government-sanctioned views of curriculum and social development
- politicians’ need to blame teachers and ‘failing schools’ rather than admit their own failure to reduce child poverty.

School Improvement, at least in its officially sanctioned forms, has had a number of profoundly anti-democratic effects, which can only be touched on here. It is important to recognise them, so that they can be challenged more forcefully.

A growing attainment gap

The attempt to make schools in poorer areas more effective by skilful management of internal change, while failing to challenge the macro-environment (competitive admissions, creeping selection, imposed curricula, judgemental forms of assessment) has led to an increased attainment gap between different social groups. The gap is apparent when children enter school, and substantial by the end of primary school, but grows during adolescence to the extent that hardly any schools in poorer areas even touch the national average level of examination success at age 16. In fact, of the secondary schools where 35% or more pupils are entitled to free school meals, only 2% reach national average examination results at age 16 (OfSTED 2000; see also Gillborn and Mirza 2000; Mortimore and Whitty 1997; Levacic and Woods 2002).

Accountability and surveillance

A profound transformation is underway in professional culture, reducing teachers’ individual and collective control over their work. This change,

though brought about in the name of ‘democracy’ (responsibility to parents who are seen as customers rather than partners in their children’s education), actually serves to hinder teachers from working more democratically with students and parents. The terms of ‘accountability’ – to whom, for what, on which criteria? – are far from democratically determined, and education is increasingly made to serve the needs of globalised capital (Burbules and Torres eds 2000)

The performativity culture leads to thoughtless knee-jerk responses to external demands for change which are inimical to authentic and sustainable school improvement.

Progress is defined in terms of outputs which strip away the sense of improvement of the human condition in favour of material and technical growth. (Clarke 2001:29)

Teachers are denied teleological influence and moral responsibility. They inhabit a ‘technically rational’ system which denies ‘any sense of historical consciousness as having a bearing and a relevance upon school life.’ (ibid: 29)

Limited space for responsiveness and initiative

The cultural patterns of British schools derive historically from the repressive traditions of the Victorian age, established as much to domesticate the children of the poor as to teach them the 3Rs. They have been modified over the years by teachers and school leaders brave enough to develop new forms of learning and relationship. In a fast moving world, it is vital to maintain an openness to change in schools. Reinforcing the shortcomings of inherited patterns, the increasing regulation of school norms represents a regressive and undemocratic closure.

For all the talk of a ‘postmodern’ age of uncertainties and the need to accept rapid change, attempts persist to define teaching in terms of a technical-rationalist list of sub-skills graduated for different career stages as competences. This is a reversion to a Fordist mass-production model of quality assurance which is at odds with the wider culture we inhabit and serves to make teachers feel permanently inadequate.

Management of professional actions by set formulae is even more difficult given the social and cultural instabilities of the surrounding culture and the need to respond creatively to children whose identities are structured around the immediate gratification of consumer pleasures – or even worse, the tensions for those who lack the money to buy these pleasures. Spontaneity is driven out, along with human emotion. Teachers are

expected to record every detail of advanced planning and obsessively record outcomes. There is a neglect of the professional quality of responsiveness, thinking on your feet and dealing with the unexpected. This particularly affects teachers working in the most troubled schools.

The emotional commitment of teachers is being sapped, and intensification of work, the guilt of not doing anything properly and a lost sense of moral purpose, is leading to the collapse of professional morale. In this climate, the attempt to impose positive emotions works in highly contradictory ways:

The neo-liberal version of the performing school requires teachers and students to be followers, but to feel good about it... As Nias (1996:305) argues, teacher emotion 'is not an indulgence; it is a professional necessity. Without feeling, without the freedom to 'face themselves', to be whole persons in the classroom, they implode, explode ... or walk away. (Gunter 2001:122)

Teacher demoralisation and shortages

The demoralisation resulting from a 'low-trust high-surveillance' regime (Mahony and Hextall 2000) is corrosive of commitment, and such a culture quickly proves its unsustainability.

Seemingly, the politicians' only answer is yet another set of targets.

The most visible impact of this high-pressure performativity culture has been a major recruitment crisis, such that nearly half of new teachers qualifying in England now leave within their first two years, and overall one in ten teachers leave the profession each year. The crisis has particularly hit those schools which have always found the greatest difficulty attracting teachers.

In order to achieve improvement, such schools have to exceed what could be termed 'normal' efforts. Members of staff have to be more committed and work harder than their peers elsewhere. What is more, they have to maintain the effort so as to sustain the improvement. (Mortimore and Whitty 1997:6)

In an environment of high-stakes accountability, schools in poorer areas have become dangerous places for teachers' careers. Results are lower in absolute terms, and progress between two points in time is less. Performance-related pay discriminates against teachers in these schools. They are emotionally more stressful, and their pupils are less likely to respond to longer-term goals and pleas to work hard. Despite the official use of 'value-addedness' and more sophisticated comparisons with

roughly similar schools, it is raw results which remain visible in local and national newspapers. Inner-city schools are at far greater risk of being named and shamed as ‘failing’ - always the common expression, despite the official euphemism ‘schools in special measures’. The cure is a tough regime to ‘turn them round’ (Ofsted 1999) – a fallacious strategy which often further demoralises, and does not help a school to rethink itself as an educational institution in relationship with a community. Finally, schools in poorer areas are faced with high-profile threats of closure and privatisation from government ministers.

Superficial responses to government initiatives

The Literacy Hour for English primary schools is a prime example. While some teachers struggle to interpret it in the light of more advanced professional knowledge, the majority are driven by insecurity to implement it mechanistically as a set of regulations to spend twenty minutes on this and ten on that. Consequently, alongside good methods such as collective thinking about texts and building children’s self-image as readers, there has been a return to decontextualised exercises which do not transfer into real literacy skills. Ironically, whereas the DfEE advised in 1997 that everybody should be ‘working to the same blueprint’, and the Literacy Strategy’s director warned those opting for alternatives that they would be ‘interrogated’ (sic!), the Inspectorate now appear to be criticising teachers for a lack of creativity.

Five and six year old children are being labelled inferior readers and given restricted reading experiences. Training videos have encouraged a return to the pseudo dialogue of closed testing questions, rather than genuine response and discussion of books. The traditional asymmetry of classroom communications is reinforced – the hidden curriculum by which children learn that their voices do not count. Teachers’ anxiety about the tests is getting in the way of their ability to respond to the concerns and interests of young readers.

When you’re doing reading and writing with year 6 [10-11 year olds] you’ve always got your eye on what they have to do for their SATs, so you’re asking questions like, can you spot the personification in this poem, or can you find a simile or use a simile in your writing. You’re just picking out the main things that you think they’re going to be asked about. (Year 6 teacher, in Hunt 2001:55)

The drive for more transmission teaching

When the National Curriculum was first introduced, teachers were advised that they would be told what to teach but not how to teach it. Since then, there has been increasing pressure on teachers to use approved methods, and especially whole-class direct instruction. The emphasis on teaching as transmission positions students as passive, obedient and dependent.

International tests which identified Taiwan as a high achiever in mathematics led to the inspection body OfSTED sending a well-known effectiveness researcher to investigate. Not surprisingly, he found much whole-class instruction – that was the clear intention of the mission. However, subsequent video-recordings comparing maths teaching in Japan with the USA have found a deeper pattern. Stigler and Hiebert (1999) have linked Japan's high performance to higher levels of conceptual understanding. Japanese children are set challenging problems to solve collaboratively in groups, whereas American students are instructed in procedures which they then have to practice individually.

Teaching in England is now under the influence of performance pay, based on flawed private research which has been exposed by the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2001). Close scrutiny of the research shows only a random correlation between the recommended teaching style (based on Reynolds' criteria) and good progress: only 55% of the teachers who were deemed outstanding according to the approved criteria achieved better than expected results, and half the classes with above average progress were taught using different methods. Despite this, the DfEE has disseminated these supposed criteria of effective teaching skills for schools to use as a standard observational tool for evaluating teachers.

An antidemocratic curriculum: limiting social understanding

The National Curriculum in England and Wales, on its first introduction, modernised teaching in the technical and scientific domain (an extended science curriculum; the design and technology reform; a high profile for information technology) but seriously restricted learning about the contemporary world. Now that education for citizenship has been introduced, we will need to ensure that it isn't undermined by mindframes of accountability. Already multiple choice tests are being introduced by examination boards, which may serve to trivialise learning. Official guidelines to teachers classify three different levels of social understanding in the most absurd manner:

At the end of this unit

most pupils: understand what it is to be an active citizen with rights and responsibilities.

some pupils have not made so much progress and: understand in simple terms what rights and responsibilities are.

some pupils have progressed further and: use the terms ‘right’, ‘responsibilities’ and ‘community’ with confidence and accuracy.

Issues such as poverty, racism, globalisation are marginalised, distorted and trivialised when treated in this way:

At the end of this unit, most pupils understand their own identities and recognise that there are many different identities locally and nationally. (QCA 2001)

Meanwhile history and geography are crowded out of the primary school curriculum by the ‘basic skills’. For increasing numbers of 14-year-olds, instead of developing more relevant content and methods, schools are encouraged to replace a balanced curriculum by vocational training.

Unfortunately, school improvement is discussed in Britain as if the curriculum does not matter very much. A genuine desire to improve schools would take seriously the needs of young people who are growing up in a world that is ecologically fragile, military threatened, and globally dominated by a small number of very rich individuals / businesses, and in which values and relationships are shifting so uncertainly.

Moving forward

My aim in this chapter was to examine the limitations and contradictions of a dominant version of school improvement in the particular situation of Britain. School Improvement stands at a crossroads. On the one hand, some voices seek to co-opt it as a subset of School Effectiveness or call for a merger between Effectiveness and Improvement. More positively, a number of British writers are moving onto more critical and democratic enquiries, often in fruitful cooperation with Canadian or Scandinavian colleagues. For example:

- John MacBeath (1999; 2000; 2003), working closely with Jean Rudduck and with European researchers such as Michael Schratz, is seeking to democratise change by focusing on school self-evaluation, including the involvement of students as researchers of their own schools (the Student Voice project)

- Keith Morrison (2002), influenced by Senge and Perkins, is using complexity theory and distributed cognition as a means of understanding school development
- Louise Stoll, Dean Fink and Lorna Earl (2003) have connected learning by students, professional learning and leadership into a vision of the learning school
- A more rigorous theoretical exploration is taking place of school structures and cultures (Harris and Bennett eds 2001) and of the concept of leadership (e.g. Gunter 2001)

We need now to move forward with hopeful determination. Those who are seeking to make schools better and more powerful sites for education need to engage in philosophical debate about educational aims and values, curriculum and pedagogy. This necessarily involves thinking about the kind of world we hope to live in. We need a new direction for improvement, one which is not so dependent, which can focus on social justice and responsibility and global citizenship, which is future oriented and genuinely transformational. We need to engage in an active search for new models of *democratic* learning, not sit blindfolded on the conveyor belt of 'effective' schooling.

