



# How to ... bring about effective improvement

**Graham Handscomb** explores different approaches to change and how their features can contribute to school improvement.

## ■ ■ School Effectiveness or School Improvement?

Much of the research literature about leading individual and organisational change has been characterised by the respective approaches of the school improvement and school effectiveness movements. Creemers and Reezigt (2005) describe the two as having different origins and in this respect also imply that they have distinctive intentions: “School effectiveness is more directed to finding out ‘what works’ in education and ‘why’; school improvement is practice and policy

oriented and intended to change education in the desired direction” (page 359). A similar distinction is made by Bennett and Harris (1999) who pinpoint this in terms of alternative emphases on structure and culture: “School effectiveness research has tended to view organisational development in terms of structural change, while the school improvement field has conversely placed an emphasis upon the cultural dimensions of organisational change” (page 533).

Each perspective brings its strengths and limitations. For some an emphasis on effectiveness strategies,



which are related directly to the classroom, brings with it greater potential for change. In contrast others see the benefits of focusing on organisational processes in order to bring about improvement:

*“Scholars have referred to the knowledge base on effective teaching and learning ... and school leadership ... on the assumption that these literatures would provide insights into the nature of classroom and school-level practices that represent high leverage foci for school improvement efforts. Other scholars have framed the study of school improvement in terms of processes associated with change on the assumption that school improvement is a form of organizational change. Another popular lens for exploring school improvement emerged from the literatures on school and organizational culture ... Later efforts derived from this perspective have been linked to the construct of learning organizations, which highlights the systemic nature of change in schools ... a more narrowly focused literature has also evolved around the study of school improvement as a domain in and of itself.”*

(Hallinger and Heck, 2011 page 3)

In terms of limitations, Wikeley, Stoll, Murillo and De Jong, (2007) state that a major criticism of school effectiveness research has been “its apparent lack of theory development ... offering empirical findings as quasi-theories that become the basis for school improvement strategies.” On the other hand they also reflect that: “school improvement research is often accused of being too far removed from the realities of the classroom. Oversimplified models that are hard to interpret within the complexities of school life are seen to offer little to teachers keen to improve their practice and their pupils’ learning outcomes” (pages 387-388).

Researchers like Gorard (2010) have been coruscating in their criticism of these traditions and particularly of what they perceive as the pernicious effect they have had on determining education policy and the direction of educational change. He claims, in particular, that because of fundamental errors in the nature of data gathered and propagated that School Effectiveness results cannot be relied upon and declares that “the whole school effectiveness model, as currently imagined, should be abandoned” (Gorard, 2010 page 760). Similarly, Coe

(2013) sees the focus on school improvement and effectiveness approaches as not only being unhelpful but also misleading, and makes the startling claim that this has led to the mistaken view that levels of attainment in England have systematically improved over the last 30 years:

*“Much of what is claimed as school improvement is illusory, and many of the most commonly advocated strategies for improvement are not robustly proven to work. Even the claims of school effectiveness research – that we can identify good schools and teachers, and the practices that make them good – seem not to stand up to critical scrutiny ... Overall, an honest and critical appraisal of our experience of trying to improve education is that, despite the best intentions and huge investment, we have failed – so far – to achieve it”.*

(Coe, 2013, page i)

#### ■ ■ Professional learning task: Failed improvement?

Read again the judgement that Coe makes above and, reflecting on your own experience, consider whether, despite much investment, attempts to bring about sustained improvements in education and in schools have failed. What evidence can be used to make a case both for and against this view?

#### ■ ■ Improvement factors

Others have not been so dismissive but have seen the tension between these two traditions as involving a rather sterile debate and have sought to develop approaches that draw on the strengths of both. So, for instance, Creemers and Reezigt (2005) judged that “in their orientation to outcomes, input, processes, and context in education, they also have much in common” and aimed to create “a comprehensive theoretical framework of school effectiveness and school improvement” However, in their research they struggled to develop a model for a combined “Effective School Improvement” approach because of the complexity of the two traditions and the contextual differences

between countries (pages 358 & 368). In their attempt Wikeley et al (2007) set out to evaluate effective school improvement programmes across the eight participating European Union countries in order to develop “a model of effective school improvement that would be of use to policy-makers and practitioners across Europe” (page 388). The factors that emerged from their *Effective School Improvement Project* were grouped under the headings:

- context;
- the role of external change agents;
- the importance of internal agency (included under this heading was the role of the principal/headteacher/school director, and also the role of “internal change agents”);
- the complexity and interconnectedness of all the factors and influences on effective school improvement.

(Adapted from Wikely et al, 2007, page 399)

Alternatively, Bennett and Harris (1999) suggested that by incorporating the concept of “power” into the analysis of the two fields of schools improvement and school effectiveness, they can be brought more successfully together. For them power is the feature that helps to bring a coherent and integrated understanding of the respective focus of school effectiveness on structures and school improvement focus on culture:

*“As structures are enacted and create formal and publicly accepted rules, so cultures are also enacted and create informal and often unstated rules. Both represent forms of constraint upon the individual, and as such represent statements of power relationships between members of the organisation ... The distribution of power within an organisation is simultaneously a key determinant and consequence of cultures as it is both a determinant and a consequence of structure.”*

(Bennett and Harris, 1999, page 539)

### Professional learning task: Change potential

Reflecting on your reading of the range of school effectiveness and school improvement research, and drawing on your own professional experience, consider your own views of which approach (or a combination of approach) has the most potential and leverage to bring about change. What are the key issues for you in this debate?

### Conclusion - Leading in chaotic times

*“Leadership required in a culture of change ... is not straightforward. We are living in chaotic conditions. Thus leaders must be able to operate under complex, uncertain circumstances”* (Fullan, 2001, page xii).

The search for a comprehensive plan or strategy of educational change that addresses individual and organisational needs and, as Hopkins, Ainscow and West (1994) once put it: “enhances student learning outcomes as well as the school’s capacity for managing change” (page 388), remains a live enterprise and one that pre-occupies researchers from a variety of traditions. The material you have studied in these HOW TO pieces have been wide ranging and covered a variety of perspectives. Perhaps prominent amongst these is the appreciation that leading individual and organisational change is complex, and context specific – both in terms of the individual school and in the broader context of time and culture. You may find it useful to reflect upon the implications of the material explored in this HOW TO section in the light of your own professional situation and the leadership of change issues that you are encountering.

**References for all four HOWTO pieces:** Coe, R. (2013) Improving Education. A triumph of hope over experience. Inaugural Lecture of Professor Robert Coe, 18 June 2013. Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring, University of Durham. ■ Creemers, B.P.M. & Reezigt, G.J. (2005). Linking school effectiveness and school improvement: the background and outline of the project. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 16, 4, pp. 359-371. ■ Fullan, M. G. (2001) *The New Meaning of Educational Change*. New York: Teachers College Press. ■ Gorard, S. (2010) Serious doubts about school effectiveness. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36: 5, 745 — 766. ■ Hallinger, P., & Heck, R.H. (2011). Leadership for learning: Does collaborative leadership make a difference? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 38(6), 654–678. ■ Hopkins, D., Ainscow, M., and West, M. (1994) *School improvement in an era of change*. Cassell