Unleashing Greatness – A Strategy for School Improvement

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In the mid-1970s, at the very start of the effective schools movement in the United States, the renowned black educator Ron Edmonds, posed the following challenge by way of three declarative statements:

1. We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us.
2. We already know more than we need to do that.
3. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far. (Hopkins, 2013, p.1)

Although these declarations are now more than 40 years old, in several respects Edmonds' assertions ring true in underlining the aspiration that student achievement *can* be realised at scale if it is underpinned by a strong sense of moral purpose and will.

Moral purpose may be at the heart of successful school and system improvement, but we will not be able to realise this purpose without powerful and increasingly 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.

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, 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 and as a consequence, they place a ceiling on the move of a system from good to great. As Michael Barber once memorably pointed out, one can mandate the move from awful to adequate and fair to good, but as one progresses, one needs to 'unleash greatness'.

The purpose of this article is to outline a school improvement strategy that assists in 'unleashing greatness'. As such it inevitably builds on our proven school improvement programmes in particular the *Improving the Quality of Education for All* and *Curiosity and Powerful Learning.* (Hopkins, 2002; Hopkins, 2020; Hopkins & Craig, 2018a). The paper proposes a simple and practical approach to school improvement designed for schools who are currently overwhelmed by a myriad of often incompatible demands from governments, community and professional associations. 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 (2015) 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!

The following eight steps accord with that dictum. Although the eight steps are described sequentially below, they are essentially interactive. As is seen later, schools can actually start anywhere in the process. The eight steps are also just a starting point, school 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 are reviewed in *Exploding the Myths of School Reform* (Hopkins 2013). The eight steps and the key evidence behind each of them are:

1. **Clarify Moral Purpose** – Ensure that the achievement and learning of students expressed as moral purpose is at the centre of everything that 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 that are underpinned by a 'development' (as compared with a 'maintenance') structure that ensures that 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 & Theories of Action** – These are the key strategies for diagnosing and articulating effective teaching practice through non-judgmental observation and the development of protocols to ensure consistency and precision.

6. **Embrace Peer Coaching and Triads** – They 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 re-design.
8. **Exploit Networking** - The most effective schools network with each other in order to learn from their best, collaborate purposefully and to share outstanding practice.

Clarify Moral Purpose

Moral purpose is not to be confused or equated with some form of romantic sentimentalism. It is clear from the global evidence of school performance that the most successful schools ensure that the achievement and learning of students expressed as moral purpose is at the centre of all that teachers and leaders do. Aspiration such as "enabling every student to realise their potential" is fine as far as it goes, but we then have to define in more concrete and contextual terms what that means for our students. This requires a focus on those strategies that have a track record of accelerating student achievement such as building student learning capability, personalising learning and the curriculum, assessment for learning and giving students a voice in their own learning.

Moral purpose may be at the heart of successful school and system improvement, but we will not be able to realise this purpose, as noted above, without powerful and increasingly specified strategies and tools to allow us to deal with the challenges presented by globalisation, as well as the increasingly turbulent and complex communities 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.

The importance of moral purpose has recently been underscored by Daniel Pink (2009) in his book, *Drive*. In it he outlines the three key components of intrinsic motivation - autonomy, mastery and purpose. He argues that people, teachers, may become disengaged and demotivated at work if they don't understand, or can't invest in, the "bigger picture." But those who believe that they are working toward something larger and more important than themselves are often the most hard-working, productive and engaged. So, encouraging teachers to find moral purpose in their work - for instance, by focussing on enhancing the life scripts of students through using increasingly powerful forms of curriculum that integrate content, learning and values - can win not only their minds, but also their hearts. Thus moral purpose in the gift that keeps on giving, it not only ensures better outcomes for students but also deepens the work culture of the school as well as the commitment of teachers.

Key Questions

Does your school's version of moral purpose link aspiration to action?

Does your school's version of moral purpose reflect the values of students, parents and the community?

Is your school's version of moral purpose widely accepted by the whole school staff?

Focus on Classroom Practice

A widely circulated international study based on the PISA research (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p.40) concluded that:

- the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers
- the only way to improve outcomes is to improve instruction
- this means taking professional development into the classroom and making it routine (e.g. through peer observation, lesson study, demonstration lessons).

The global evidence is clear – it is improving the quality of classroom practice rather than structural reform that has the most powerful effect in terms of raising student outcomes. It is axiomatic therefore that the focus of school improvement, the non-negotiables described below, need to be on teaching and learning.

It is the lack of such a focus that has inhibited recent reform efforts from unleashing the potential of our students. We need to reach down into the classroom and deepen reform efforts by moving beyond superficial curriculum change to a more profound understanding of how teacher behaviour connects to learning. In particular, it requires a direct and unrelenting focus on what many are now calling the 'instructional core' (City et al 2009).

There are three features associated with the instructional core that require emphasising:

- The first feature is that there are four distinct components to the instructional core that provide the framework for developing curiosity and powerful learning within our students. They are curriculum frameworks, pedagogic knowledge, student learning and assessment, as seen in **Figure 1.**
- The second feature follows from the first, and is that one element of the instructional core cannot be changed without impacting directly on the others.
- The third feature is the appreciation that the 'instructional task' is at the centre of the instructional core. The instructional task is the actual work that students do as part of classroom practice. It is the tasks that students undertake that predict their performance, particularly when they located within the student's 'zone of proximal development' .

Figure 1 – The Instructional Core

Although each of the four elements of the instructional core are equally important, in the early stages of our school improvement work we focus unrelentingly on the quality and consistency of teaching. This is not necessarily in precedence to the curriculum, but as a means of delivering it. Enhancing the quality of teaching practice will have the most immediate and sustained impact on student performance. The truth of this contention has been evidenced over the past ten years through the work of John Hattie (2009), particularly his book *Visible Learning.* In *Visible Learning*, he analyses many hundreds of research studies on how different teacher practices influence student learning. In **Table 1** below he gives a summary of those practices with low impact on student outcomes as compared with those with high levels of impact. What is interesting is that many popular policy initiatives and structural changes have low impact as compared with the more precise teaching strategies that focus directly on student learning.

Table 1. Examples of low-and high-impact investments in building academic achievement (from Hattie, 2009)

Influence	d	Influence	d
Retaining back a year	-0.32	Collective teacher efficacy	1.57
Suspension/Expelling students	-0.20	Student assessment capability	1.33
Charter Schools	0.04	Cognitive Task Analysis	1.29
Teacher performance pay	0.05	Response to Intervention	1.09
Single-sex schools	0.08	Conceptual change programs	0.99
Modifying school calendars/ timetables	0.09	Strategies to integrate with prior knowledge	0.93
Initial teacher education programs	0.10	Self-efficacy	0.92
Tracking/Streaming	0.12	Success criteria	0.88
School choice	0.12	Transfer strategies	0.86
Reducing class size	0.16	Classroom discussion	0.82
Growth vs Fixed mindsets	0.16	Deliberate Practice	0.79
One-to-one Laptops	0.16	Teacher clarity	0.75
Home-school programs	0.16	Feedback	0.74
Web-based learning	0.18	Reciprocal teaching	0.74
Within-class grouping	0.18	Rehearsal & memorisation	0.73
Systems accountability systems	0.20	Building student confidence	0.71
Adding finances	0.21	Goals/success criteria	0.68

Key Questions

Does your school staff understand the importance of the instructional core both strategically and operationally?

How confident are you that all the tasks that your student's undertake are located within their zones of proximal development?

Are the teaching practices employed in the school well specified, consistently applied and directly applicable to the learning needs of your students?

Decide on the Non-negotiables

We noted earlier the common experience of many schools associated with the pressure for change and overload of policy initiatives. So much so that many schools and their leaders feel virtually paralysed by them. With the best of intentions, they try and do everything and then end up by doing nothing well. We also noted Michael Fullan's advice to 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. There is now global evidence to support this common sense guidance. (Mourshead, Chijioke & Barber, 2010). Those successful leaders who do this tend to follow a common "playbook" of practices:

- decide on what is "non-negotiable"
- install capable and like-minded people in the most critical positions
- engage with stakeholders
- secure the resources for non-negotiables
- get "early wins" on the board quickly.

The non-negotiables become the key development objectives that the school focuses on unrelentingly in the short / medium term. They are underpinned by a 'development' (as compared with a 'maintenance') structure that ensures that adequate resources are made available for improvement work, in particular the identification of a school improvement team and peer coaching. This last sentence is crucial but needs a little unpacking.

Part of the overload problem is related to the school's inability to distinguish between 'maintenance' and 'development' (Hopkins, 2013). School's obviously need to be able to maintain their existing organisational functions to a high degree, but also to have the capacity to develop and change. The *maintenance structure* is concerned with relatively permanent systems and processes that are necessary for the school to get its work done as efficiently as possible. The *development structure* is there to develop new ways of working - the non-negotiables - that over time, add value to the school, as new practices become common practice and the 'way we do things around here'. What usually happens though, is that schools tend to overburden their maintenance system by asking it to take on development roles for which it was never designed. The separation of maintenance activities from development work is essential for the continuous improvement of a school and both need their separate infrastructures as shown in **Figure 2**.

The three key elements of the schools development structure are: the establishing of a school improvement team; peer coaching and teacher collaboration. The latter two components are described later, so a word about school improvement teams.

Typically, the school improvement team is cross-hierarchical and could be as few as three or four in comparatively small schools, to between six and eight in large schools. Though one of the team is likely to be the head or principal, it is important to establish groups that are genuinely representative of the range of perspectives and ideas available in the school. The school improvement group is responsible for managing school improvement efforts, the non-negotiables, on a day-to-day basis within the school. They are supported through a core training program, through networking with school improvement teams from other schools, by external consultancy support and facilitation and a limited amount of allocated time to do their work.

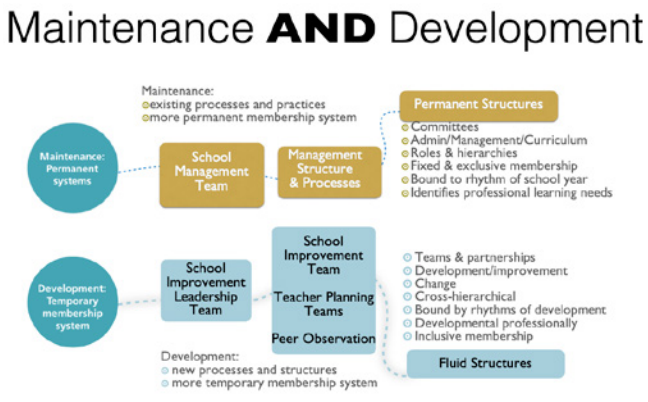


Figure 2 - Maintenance and Development Structures

Key Questions

Is the whole staff clear about what the non-negotiables are in your school and are actively working on them?

Is there a distinction between the maintenance and development functions in your school, particularly the purposes, funding and responsibilities involved?

Is there a school improvement team in your school and how do they operate?

Articulate the Narrative

Stories help us make sense of where we are and to remember where we are headed. 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. It is this that both energises and provides direction for our colleagues, students and communities. Steering a school improvement strategy is easier when everyone who must contribute to it - leaders, teachers, support staff, our students, and the wider school community - shares a common story about:

- where our school is now (and what will happen if we stay on the same course)
- where our school is headed as we take the course mapped out in our school improvement strategy
- why we should commit to the new direction.

Another way of thinking about these points is offered by Chip and Dan Heath (2011) in *Switch: How to change things when change is hard*.

The Switch idea	The school improvement perspective
A credible idea makes people believe	Our theories of action
An emotional idea makes people care	Our moral purpose
The right story makes people act	Our collaborative action influences every classroom, the whole school, the system

Deep in our minds we give stories a privileged place. They are a currency for conversation, for exchanging ideas. A story is a medium for understanding in concrete ways how things are and how we can improve them. A story is a flight simulator for the mind - we can chart a new direction and vividly see where it takes us.

It's this vividness that schools and system leaders can summon through stories. It is about both seeing the path ahead, and about taking that path - it is about acting with clarity. Good school improvement stories have the following characteristics (Hopkins & Craig, 2018c, p.10); they:

- are **urgent** - they translate the vision of curiosity, of a focus on inquiry, into clear principles for action.
- offer a **motivating** image of the future we are creating for our school and our students.
- link **moral purpose** to action in practical and concrete ways - our values are the constant companions of our actions.
- make **tangible connections** between teaching and learning. these connections sustain a teaching and learning culture that produces and maintains high standards and student empowerment.

- are **inclusive**, and **oriented to action** in every classroom and across the whole school.
- are **shared and understood** by staff, students, and the school community.

We have found it very helpful, if not essential, to, at some point translate the narrative into a two / three-year school improvement planning framework that steers implementation of the non-negotiables and monitors their impact (Hopkins & Craig, 2018c, p.12). This framework, as seen below, provides both guidance and evidence for:

- building the narrative
- ensuring priorities are selected that produce short term gains
- laying the foundations for the next phase of the school improvement journey.

The School Improvement Team is responsible for implementing the School Improvement Framework.

Key Questions

Does your school's narrative link moral purpose to action?

Does the core story describe the direction the school is moving in and what success will look like - the desired state?

Is your narrative understood and owned by all sections of the school community - students, staff, parents and governors?

Instructional Rounds & Theories of Action

Viewing classroom practice in terms of the Instructional Core described earlier, offers us the potential of establishing a professional practice in the school that can create a new culture of teaching and learning. The question is - how do we actually create this new culture of teaching and learning that embraces the Instructional Core?

One answer is to establish an Instructional Rounds process to generate a shared understanding and common language around effective teaching practices (City et al., 2009). In our school improvement work, the outcome of the process is the identification of a set of Theories of Action for the School and Network that can be used as a basis for further professional development and school improvement. A theory of action connects the actions of teachers with the consequences of their actions—the learning and achievement of their students. A theory of action is a link between cause and effect: if we take a particular action, then we expect that action to have specific effects. Together, these theories of action provide the basis of the protocols we have developed that ensure precision, consistency and engagement in the classrooms of our schools.

The process works like this:

- the network convenes in the host school for an Instructional Round visit. The purpose of the Instructional Round is to generate a series of Theories of Action that present a positive picture of the pedagogic practice of the school. The emphasis is solely on description, not evaluation or judgement.
- after completing the round of classroom observations, the entire group assembles in a common location to work through the process of description, analysis and prediction.
- participants then develop a series of 'theory of action' principles from the analysis of the observations and discusses the next level of work for the school and network to assist them on their school improvement journeys.

As our experience with instructional rounds has continued to deepen through experience in schools in the UK, Australia, Sweden and elsewhere, we have learned that despite the phase or context of schooling, the theories of action generated by each school were in most cases very similar. They are:

- harnessing learning intentions, narrative and pace
- setting challenging learning tasks
- framing higher order questions
- connecting feedback and data
- committing to assessment for learning
- implementing cooperative group structures.

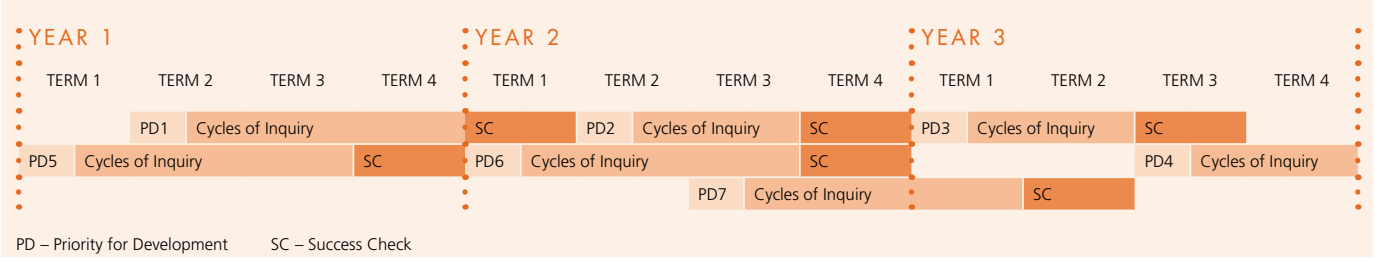
It is important to note that all of these theories of action are characterised by an approach to teaching that has enquiry and personalised learning at its centre. They also have a high level of empirical support in the educational research literature (Hattie, 2009) and are consistent with most policy and accountability prescriptions related to effective teaching. The six theories of action comprise the content of our *Curiosity and Powerful Learning* manual (Hopkins & Craig, 2018b). The manual contains a description of the individual theory of action as well as a protocol or rubric. Each rubric provides a precise description of the habits, behaviours and ways of doing that characterise teacher practice at four phases of a professional development continuum - Commencing, Intermediate, Accomplished, and Expert. The teacher protocols provide a common reference point, specification and language for teachers to use for professional learning and development through for peer coaching as seen in the section below.

Key Questions

Does your school staff regularly engage in instructional Rounds and appreciate that the focus of the observations is on description not evaluation or judgement?

How far do the six theories of action reflect common consistent and wide spread practice in your school?

Does your school's school improvement team contextualise and provide examples of the theories of action related to the specific context of teaching and learning in the school?



Peer Coaching and Triads

The potential contained in the theories of action described above is to create a new culture of teaching within the school that promotes both enquiry and achievement. This requires adopting staff development strategies that have the ability to build a common language of instructional practice within and across schools.

The strategy most suited to the acquisition of the theories of action is the now established 'peer coaching' process developed by Bruce Joyce and his colleagues (Joyce & Showers, 1995; Joyce & Calhoun, 2010). Their research on staff development has identified a number of key training components which, when used in combination, have much greater power than when they are used alone. The major components of training are:

1. Presentation of theory or description of skill or strategy.
2. Modelling or demonstration of skills or models of teaching.
3. Practise in simulated and classroom settings.
4. Structured and open-ended feedback (provision of information about performance).
5. Peer Coaching for application (hands-on, in- classroom assistance with the transfer of skills and strategies to the classroom).

It is also helpful to distinguish between the locations in which these various forms of staff development are best located – either in the 'workshop' or the 'workplace'. The workshop, which is equivalent to the best practice on the traditional professional development course, is where teachers gain understanding, see demonstrations of the teaching strategy they may wish to acquire, and have the opportunity to practise them in a non-threatening environment. This is Steps 1-4 above. If the aim however is to transfer those skills back into the workplace - the classroom and school - then merely attending the workshop is insufficient. This implies changes to the workplace and the way in which staff development is organised. In particular this means the opportunity for immediate and sustained practice, collaboration and peer coaching, within triads or small groups of staff - Step 5.

Ideally every adult working with students in the school will be in a triad. It is common practice for the composition of triads to be in mixed ability, cross – curricula or cross year groups. Different combinations obviously have different advantages – friendship groups for example may be preferred initially if staff are not experienced with, or are fearful of, observation. Most schools have a member of the school improvement team as a member of or linked to each triad.

Peer observation within triads needs to be scheduled on a regular basis and built into the time-table. This however need not be time consuming: fifteen to twenty minutes observation when using the protocol is usually plenty. This though needs to be followed as soon as possible by a debrief discussion using the data gathered from the protocol. This can be during coffee breaks or over lunch. Ideally Triad member A observes Triad member B in week one; then Triad member B observes Triad member C in week two, and so on. The triad should meet once every half term as a group of three to record progress and plan the next half terms observations. Using these reports, the school improvement team then reviews progress overall.

Key Questions

Does your school's staff regularly engage in instructional Rounds and appreciate that the focus of the observations is on description not evaluation or judgement?

How far do the six theories of action reflect common, consistent and wide spread practice in your school?

Does your school's school improvement team contextualise and provide examples of the theories of action related to the specific context of teaching and learning in the school?

Instructional Leadership

Instructional Leadership is the leadership approach most closely associated with increased levels of student achievement. It is a function that is a) pervasive in the School / Network / Trust rather than being located in a single role; b) generates a culture of high expectations and collaborative working; and c) has moral purpose and the enhancement of student learning at its core.

Our recent work on Instructional Leadership (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2019) has been widely cited. Our seven bold claims are seen below.

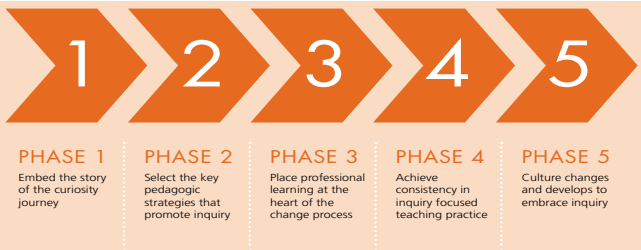
Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership	
1	School leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning.
2	Almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices.
3	It is the enactment of these basic leadership practices – not the practices themselves – that is responsive to the context.
4	School leaders improve pupil learning indirectly through their influence on staff motivation and working conditions.
5	School leadership has a greater influence on schools and pupils when it is widely distributed.
6	Some patterns of leadership distribution are much more effective than others.
7	A small handful of personal 'traits' (such as being open minded, flexible, persistent and optimistic) explain a high proportion of the variation in leader effectiveness.

Through these seven strong claims we describe the four central domains of Instructional Leadership: setting direction, managing teaching and learning, developing people and developing the organisation. **Table 2** on the next page sets out these practices (Hopkins & Higham, 2007). This analysis reinforces the argument that enhancing learning and teaching is the key priority for school leadership.

Table 2 - Key Capabilities of Instructional Leaders.

Core Practices	Key Instructional Leadership Behaviours
Setting direction	Total commitment to enable every learner to reach their potential with a strategic vision that extends into the future and brings immediacy to the delivery of improvements for students.
	Ability to translate vision into whole school programs the extend the impact of pedagogic and curricular developments into other classrooms, departments and schools.
Managing Teaching and Learning	Ensure every child is inspired and challenged through appropriate curriculum and a repertoire of teaching styles and skills that underpin personalized learning.
	Develop a high degree of clarity about and consistency of teaching quality to both create the regularities of practice that sustain improvement and to enable sharing of best practice and innovation.
Developing people	Enable students to become more active learners, develop thinking and learning skills and take greater responsibility for their own learning. Involve parents and the community to promote the valuing of positive attitudes to learning and minimize the impact of challenging circumstances on expectations and achievement.
	Develop schools as professional learning communities, with relationships built and fostered across and beyond schools to provide a range of learning experiences and professional development opportunities for staff.
Developing the organization	Create an evidence-based school, with decisions effectively informed by student data, with self-evaluation and external support used to seek out approaches to school improvement that are most appropriate to specific contextual needs.
	Managing resources, workforce reform and the environment to support learning and well-being; and extend an organization's vision of learning to involve networks of schools collaborating to build, for instance, curriculum diversity, professional support, extended and welfare services.

Although the impact of leadership on student achievement and school effectiveness has been acknowledged for some time, it is only recently that we have begun to understand more fully the fine-grained nature of Instructional Leadership. In addition to the leadership behaviours summarised above we have also found that the most effective Instructional Leaders follow a sequenced or phased implementation plan consistent with the key messages in this article as seen below (Hopkins & Craig, 2018c, p.9).



Key Questions

How far are the Seven Strong Claims evident in the leadership behaviours in your school?

What proportion of their working time are the senior leaders in your school focussing on the four key behaviours? If it is not 75% or above - why not?

Is there a development or implementation plan in your school that leads coherently and strategically in identifiable phases from narrative to eventual culture change?

Networking in Multi-Academy Trusts (MAT)

So far the discussion has focussed on the individual school. No school however is an Island and will always be part of a 'system' of one sort or another. If a school's improvement journey is to be sustained over the long term, the developments have to be integrated into the very fabric of the system pedagogy. McKinsey (Mourshead, Chijioke & Barber, 2010) identified three ways that improving systems do this:

- by establishing collaborative practices
- by developing a mediating layer between the schools and the centre; and
- by architecting tomorrow's leadership.

We have already discussed collaboration and leadership, so it is important to stress here the need for some 'mediating level' within the system to connect the centre to schools and schools to each other. The most effective Networks have assumed this role and developed productive ways of learning from their best, for collaborating purposefully and the sharing of outstanding practice. They also take collective ownership of the coherent 'School Improvement Strategy' described in this article.

In England currently, the most common middle tier organisation is the Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) (Hopkins, 2016). In outstanding MATs, capacity is built at the local level to ensure that all those in the Trust's family of schools progress as rapidly as possible towards excellence. **Figure 3** illustrates how this works:

- central to local capacity building is the Regional Director or Executive Principal who provides leadership, develops the narrative and acts as the Trust's champion in that geographic area.
- one of their key tasks is to build local capacity by training a group of lead practitioners in the MAT's ways of working, materials and strategies.
- the training design used to develop trainers is the joyce and showers coaching model.
- these trainers then work with the school improvement teams in each school to build within-school capacity and consistency.
- inter-school networking allows for authentic innovation and the transfer of outstanding practice, thus building the capacity of the network as a whole.

In our experience, the three key components of this strategy - school improvement teams, staff development processes and networking - should provide the focus for much of the training for executive principals or equivalent within the MAT, as they play their critical role in systemic improvement. In moving to scale, it is clear from international bench marking studies of school performance that (Hopkins, 2013):

- decentralisation by itself increases variation and reduces overall system performance. There is a consequent need for some 'mediating level' within the system to connect the centre to schools and schools to each other - *Networks and MATs can provide this function.*
- leadership is the crucial factor both in school transformation and system renewal, so investment particularly in Head / Principal and leadership training is essential - *hence the use of frameworks such as these eight steps and the school improvement pathway (see below) to guide action.*
- the quality of teaching is the best determinant of student performance, so that any reform framework must address the professional repertoires of teachers and other adults in the classroom - *thus the focus in high performing Trusts and Networks on the progress of learners and the development of teachers.*
- outstanding educational systems find ways of learning from its best and strategically uses the diversity within the system to good advantage - *this is why capacity needs to be built not only within Trusts and Networks, but also between them at the system level.*

Key Questions

Is your school a member of an established Network or MAT?

If so, does the Network or MAT have a coherent and systematic approach to capacity building?

Do you feel that as part of being a member of your Network or MAT that best practice is shared and that the whole 'system' is on an improvement trajectory?

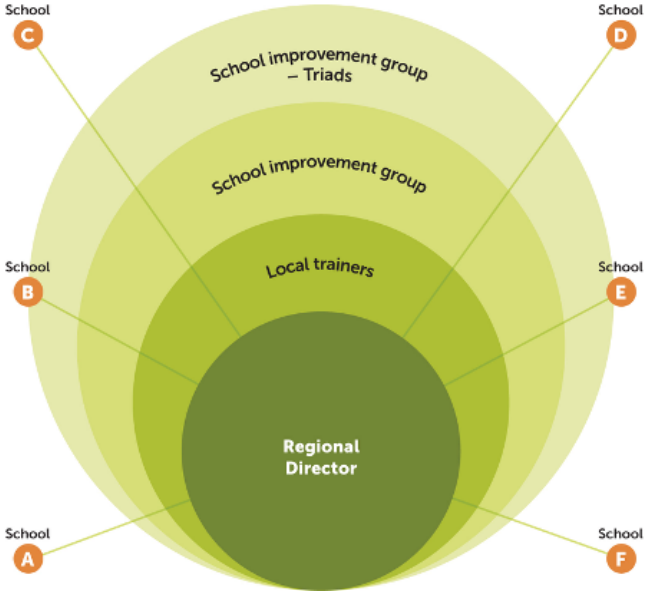


Figure 3 - Local Capacity Building Model

School Improvement Pathway

The discussion to this point has assumed that all schools are uniformly effective and have the capacity to manage and implement a school improvement strategy such as described here. Unfortunately this is not always the case. Indeed it is now well established that schools , and indeed all organisations, are at various stages or phases of development (Hopkins 2013). One important consequence of this is that although the phases or steps of this generic improvement model all need to be followed, they also have to be adapted to the context or stage of development of the individual school.

In order to assist with this process of adaptation and contextualisation we have developed the School Improvement Pathway (Hopkins & Craig, 2018c, pp.24-28). The School Improvement Pathway is a framework that assists school leaders and teachers to diagnose current orientations to student learning, and from that diagnosis to map a pathway to excellence. Each school begins its improvement journey at a different point on the School Improvement Pathway. The performance continuum describes schools as moving along a Pathway from 'awful to adequate', 'adequate to good', 'good to great', and 'great to excellent.'

It is now clear that when standards are too low or variable, more central direction is needed initially to improve a school. Over time, as school practice and student performance improve, then less prescription is needed as the school enhances its professional capability. Through this work, we have also gained specific knowledge about the combination of strategies needed to move a school along the continuum from 'awful to adequate' to 'great to excellent'. When systems and schools use this knowledge strategically they make significant and rapid progress.

The Pathway also specifies five improvement dimensions:

- Curriculum
- Teaching
- Learning
- Assessment/data and accountability
- Leadership.

The Pathway identifies key issues that emerge along the school improvement continuum. It poses a series of questions to help progress development.

These questions assist school leaders to:

- complete an honest diagnosis of their school's current performance – this is essential preparation for precise strategic decision making and planning
- prepare a plan for progress towards excellence.

What excellence means for each school evolves continually. We must adapt the school's narrative and improvement plans so they remain relevant to changing context. Ongoing adaptation is facilitated by regularly reassessing where the school is situated on the School Improvement Pathway.

Where to Start

Inevitably, for ease of exposition, articles such as this tend to follow linear logic. This has both strengths and weaknesses. A strength is that there is clarity and strategic rationality in the way the phases or steps are described and build on each other. A weakness would be that this approach does not accommodate the contextual realities that schools regularly face. In recognition of this we provided in the previous section a way of taking into account the school's stage of development through the use of the School Improvement Pathway.

In this section we note that it is not mandatory to follow each step in sequence and that schools may choose to enter at different points in the sequence. For example, one of the schools that we have recently begun to work with had just started an episode of curriculum innovation and did not wish for a variety of reasons to delay implementation. Our advice, as seen in the diagram below, was that they continue with the curriculum changes and then backward map to the non-negotiables, which would of course be related to the curriculum, and establish the narrative around those changes. They would then plan forward in order to embed curriculum implementation within a more comprehensive process. Other points of entry are of course possible.

Coda

This article reflects the school improvement strategy developed by the International Centre for Educational Enhancement, University of Bolton. They write from the perspective of being 'school improvement activists'. They locate themselves in the middle of that triangle bounded by the vertices of practice, research and policy. Over the years, they have variously been teachers, principals, professors, researchers, policy-makers, civil servants and consultants. Most recently, David has been associated with the implementation of the 'Curiosity and Powerful Learning' school improvement programme with cohorts of schools in Australia and England (Hopkins, 2013; Hopkins 2020.) Other colleagues have been working with an international network of schools inspired by Kunskapsskolan's personalised learning model, which through a goal driven approach brings intrinsic motivation and agency to students so they achieve more than they thought possible (see - www.kunskapsskolan.com). David's article in this edition reflects those experiences.

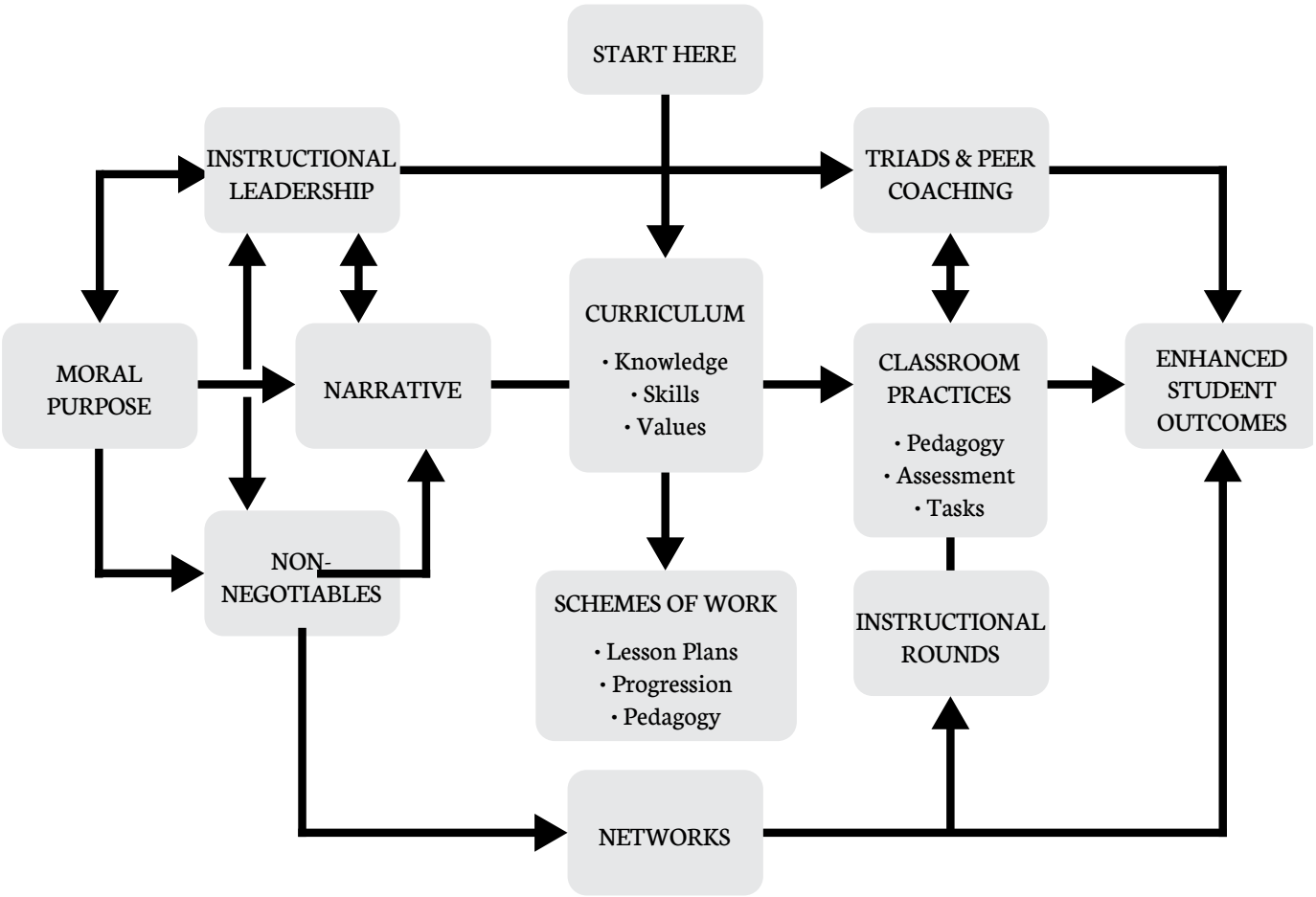


Figure 4 – Unleashing Greatness: An Interactive Model

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