

# seminar series224

## Exploding the myths of school reform

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## Introduction

The title of this paper, as for the book on which it is based – *Exploding the Myths of School Reform* – is deliberately provocative (Hopkins, 2013). It is underpinned by a conviction that the failure of so many educational reform efforts to impact on the learning and performance of students is due to misguided action, based on a number of myths associated with school reform that remain prevalent in education to the present day. It is instructive here to be reminded of the danger of living by myths, as Jonathan Powell (2010, p 5) did for me in the following quotation from Machiavelli's *The Prince*,<sup>1</sup> which Powell cited in his recent book, *The New Machiavelli: How to Wield Power in the Modern World*.

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

Powell's point is that too often in politics a conventional wisdom emerges that satisfies a particular group's version of the truth and quite rapidly enters the zeitgeist but, at best, it is a myth, a parody of the truth. If the myths are then acted upon, the subsequent actions will fail. Sadly, myths abound in education; think for example of the debates around class size, teaching quality and the influence of external accountability. This paper is about myth busting and outlines ten myths that constrain the realisation of the moral purpose of school and system reform.

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## Ten myths constraining school and system reform

### Myth 1 – The myth that achievement cannot be realised at scale for all students

In beginning to explode the myth that achievement cannot be realised at scale for all students, it is instructive to go way back to the 1970s, to the very start of the ‘effective schools’ movement. It was then that the renowned educator Ron Edmonds, who became known as the movement’s initial leader in the United States, issued a challenge, by way of three declarative statements (1979, p 23), as shown below.

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.*

Although these declarations are now more than 30 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. A recent review of the research on school and system improvement (Hopkins et al, 2011) however, suggests that Edmonds was both right and wrong.

Crucially, educators must be able to contextualise the evidence base on successful school improvement and customise it to their own context for the benefit of all learners.

Edmonds’ passion for school effectiveness and social justice was certainly right, as was his aspiration for the realisation of potential for all students. He was also correct when he intimated that this passion was not being realised in the current context. Where he was almost certainly wrong was his contention that enough was known back then to improve all schools ‘whenever and wherever we choose’.

As will be argued on the pages that follow, it is only now, in the light of sufficient contextually specific knowledge, that we are learning enough to be helpful to most professional educators in meeting the challenge of improvement posed by school reform in the 21st century.

There are many examples in the book that disprove the myth and support Edmond’s original aspiration. Three such examples that serve to make the point briefly are:

- the **twelve outstanding secondary schools** (Ofsted, 2009) that, despite serving some of the most economically disadvantaged communities in England, consistently have 80 per cent of their 16-year-old students achieving five or more good passes at the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examinations, as compared with the national average;
- the **National Literacy Strategy** in England, which between 1997 and 2001 raised the performance of 11-year-olds from 63 per cent reading at expected levels in 1997 to 75 per cent in 2000 (Hopkins, 2007); and
- evidence from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)’s international benchmarking study, **Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)**, which tracks the dramatic educational improvement of 15-year-old students in countries such as Canada, Norway, Poland and Switzerland. This is both in terms of excellence in student performance and equity (ie, reducing the variation within the whole student population).

(Hopkins 2013)

Although this evidence is sufficient to disprove the myth, it should not make us feel complacent. The field of school and system improvement needs ever more applied research. The operational work of improving schools requires educators who understand and implement the results of that research and in so doing contribute to future research. Crucially, educators must be able to contextualise the

evidence base on successful school improvement and customise it to their own context for the benefit of all learners.

## Myth 2 – The myth of school autonomy

Having set the scene, we need now to sketch out in more detail the architecture of school and system reform. The myth that is particularly relevant here relates to autonomy. The myth of autonomy is currently highly popular, given the increasing prevalence of ‘right of centre’ governments to embrace the trend towards devolution of school management. The rhetoric is that if we let schools be free – release them from bureaucratic control and encourage independence, self-governance and making one’s own decisions – then they will flourish. This is an attractive and populist image.

However we know from the evidence of PISA (OECD, 2011) that there is no correlation between decentralisation and achievement, and that the world’s best-performing educational systems sustain improvement by

- establishing collaborative practices around teaching and learning;
- developing a mediating layer between the schools and the centre; and
- nurturing tomorrow’s leadership.

The McKinsey report on *Capturing the Leadership Premium* (Barber, Whelan and Clark 2010, p 8) is unequivocal when it states the following.

*Finally, differences in what leaders do are not directly related to the level of autonomy they are given. Internationally, there is no relationship between the degree of autonomy enjoyed by a school principal and their relative focus on administrative or instructional leadership.*

Exploding this myth is not an exercise in negativity because the evidence that disproves it also helps us acquire a more sophisticated understanding of the contours of a new educational landscape. There is an important caution to be entered here, however. As with

all the other myths, just because it is wrong or misguided does not mean that the status quo should be endorsed. In most cases the myth is correct in identifying a problem; sadly, it is the solutions that invariably are wrong.

Debunking the autonomy myth, though, is both tricky and vital: tricky because it is ubiquitous as well as populist; vital because if we allow the simple-minded form of autonomy to flourish, a few schools may well improve, but the variation in school performance will inevitably increase and social equity will remain a far-off goal.

The debate should move away from structures, which in any case should be flexible and responsive to context

Unfortunately, the debate is often clouded by a dispute over structures, and this is where I have some sympathy with the autonomy lobby. They often point out that middle-tier organisations have become bloated, self-serving bureaucracies, more concerned with administration and their own careers than supporting the improvement of schools. Although an exaggeration, one can see their point! The debate should move away from structures, which in any case should be flexible and responsive to context, to the functions that the middle-tier performs to support systemic improvement.

Again, the recent McKinsey report *Capturing the Leadership Premium* (Barber et al, 2010) recognises not only the need for quality school leadership, but also the importance of the middle tier to system reform. It is here where the debate should be located; the discussion of structures is second-order as long as they are flexible enough to reflect and support local needs. Barber and colleagues (2010, p 23–24) argued that there is a growing body of evidence on the potential for the middle tier to support and drive improvement in schools and learning. Their review identified the following five practices that explain the contributions the middle tier can make.

1. Middle-tier leaders can help support weaker school leaders, both improving and supplementing their leadership to raise the overall effectiveness of leadership and management in a school.
2. The middle tier often plays a crucial role in identifying principals' development needs and providing appropriate development support.
3. The middle tier can have a role in managing clusters and lateral learning.
4. In systems that go beyond self-identification, the middle tier usually plays a crucial role in helping identify and develop leadership capacity.
5. The middle tier can contribute to strengthening and moderating accountability.

**Myth 3 – The myth that poverty is a determinant of student and school performance**

This is an important myth to explode, for both social justice and strategic reasons. Not only is it morally wrong that poverty is a determinant of educational achievement, but it is also important to remind ourselves that those 'effective schools' that do break the association between poverty and achievement share similar characteristics. So by exploding this myth we also understand better the qualities of effective schools.

An overarching sense of consistency and coordination is a key element that cuts across the effectiveness correlates and permeates our better schools.

Significant quantitative data is presented in the book to persuade even the most sceptical of the vulnerability of this myth (Hopkins, 2013). If we accept this for the moment as given, it may be helpful to discuss the implications of such evidence. Some time ago now, Joe Murphy reformulated the debate on school effectiveness by articulating the 'real legacy of the effective school movement'. He identified four aspects to the legacy (Murphy, 1992, p 94–6).

*Aspect 1. The educability of learners*

At the heart of the effective schools movement is an attack on the prevailing notion of the distribution of achievement according to a normal curve. There is a clear demonstration that all students can learn.

*Aspect 2. A focus on outcomes*

Effective school advocates argue persuasively that one can judge the quality of education only by examining student outcomes, especially indices of learning. Equally importantly, they define success not in absolute terms, but as the value added to what students brought to the educational process.

*Aspect 3. Taking responsibility for students*

The third major contribution of the effective schools movement is its attack on the practice of blaming the victim for the shortcomings of the school itself. The movement has been insistent that the school community takes a fair share of the responsibility for what happens to the young people in its care.

*Aspect 4. Attention to consistency throughout the school community*

One of the most powerful and enduring lessons from all the research on effective schools is that the better schools are more tightly linked – structurally, symbolically and culturally – than the less effective ones. They operate more as an organic whole and less as a loose collection of disparate subsystems. An overarching sense of consistency and coordination is a key element that cuts across the effectiveness correlates and permeates our better schools.

This analysis represents a major contribution both to the effective schools literature as well as a challenge to school improvement. The legacy of the effective schools movement leads to a recognition that there is useful and increasingly precise knowledge that can be transferred from school to school. This represents progress, because for some time there was another myth that all schools were unique and required distinct and idiosyncratic improvement strategies.

Despite all this, the myth is a tough nut to crack and sadly we cannot claim to have exploded it fully. What has been demonstrated, however, is that poverty is **not necessarily** a determinant of student and school performance. The critical point is that the elimination of poverty as a determinant is not the result of aspiration, as important as that is – rather it is the consequence of deliberate actions by teachers fuelled by moral purpose and facilitated by strategic whole-school planning.

#### **Myth 4 – The myth that it is the curriculum rather than the learning that counts**

Despite its relatively recent history, the idea of ‘personalisation’ has nevertheless become widely popular in many countries as an approach to public sector reform (OECD, 2004). In education this can be understood as ‘personalising learning’ – the drive to tailor education to individual needs, interests and aptitudes, in order to fulfil every young person’s potential and enhance their ability to learn. The introduction of the concept of ‘personalised learning’ into the English education system in 2004 (Miliband, 2004; DfES, 2004), had very clear moral and strategic purposes in mind. Moral purpose was defined by the commitment to ensure that every student reaches her/his potential, through making satisfactory progress year-on-year.

The introduction of an emphasis on personalised learning was part of a deliberate effort to shift the education system from an outside–in to an inside–out way of working. This approach was deliberately not focused on the slavish adoption of externally developed or imposed curricula, but on the use of proven practices as tools to raise standards of achievement, as well as building student and teacher capacity for learning. A system that responds to individual pupils, by creating an education path that takes account of their needs, interests and aspirations, will not only generate excellence, it will also make a strong contribution to equity and social justice (Leadbeater, 2005; DfCSF, 2007).

This discussion also serves to challenge the perception that it is the curriculum rather than the learning that counts, the myth that provides the focus for this chapter. Recent analyses from research, policy and practice suggest that although the curriculum – and, in particular, curriculum choice, curriculum materials and curriculum breadth – is important (DfES, 2006; Gilbert, 2006; West-Burnham, 2010), it is an emphasis on learning rather than the curriculum that provides the key to personalisation within the school system.

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This is well illustrated in the following quote from Peter Matthews’ work (Ofsted, 2009, p 42–43), already noted, on those schools that make the difference.

*These schools use a range of strategies to provide students with the skills they need to talk about their own learning and experience of education. They listen very carefully to what the students have to say and use such feedback to improve teaching. ... As well as, arguably, providing the most useful feedback that a teacher can receive, this is also highly motivating for students. Apart from the fact that it leads to better lessons, the students feel that they are in a genuine partnership with the school and that their views are valued. The message is very clear: ‘We are here to enable you to learn and we are committed to doing it as well as we possibly can’.*

Much evidence is presented in this paper to support the claim that, in terms of student achievement, it is the learning that counts. The focus here has been on a particular approach – personalised learning – and has been for the important reason that it is learning skill that will endure into the future while, as we progress into the 21st century, curriculum content will have



an increasingly short half-life. It is on this basis that it is claimed that the myth of curriculum dominance has been exploded. Of course, this is not to say that the curriculum is unimportant – that would be foolish – but, within any given curriculum context, it is how a school addresses learning that is the critical issue in terms of student progress and achievement.

There are two other, somewhat contradictory but ultimately complementary, points to be made in connection to this myth.

- The first is that assuming a curriculum is in place in the school, focusing on the quality of teaching and learning will make the most rapid progress in terms of student achievement and learning.
- Secondly, if the curriculum is developed on an enquiry basis, then this can only complement the emphasis on personalised learning.

#### **Myth 5 – The myth that teaching is either an art or a science**

The myth that teaching is either an art or a science is mistaken, because of course it is both! Yet this polarisation has a long history and reflects a dualism – that teachers only learn from experience on the one hand, and that there are prescriptions related to research evidence that need to be in lock step on the other. Despite the self-evident foolishness contained in both these positions, reaching a concordat has taken much time and even now has not been fully achieved.

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The argument I am making is that the various theories of action and models of teaching and learning are simply tools that teachers can use to create more powerful learning experiences for their students.

In exploding the myth that teaching is either an art or science, and establishing that it is both, the argument follows the traditions of good science, in working from observations, to developing propositions and then testing their value in practice. The theories of action for teaching and learning that we have developed recently, emerged inductively from the work of hundreds of teachers with whom we have been working both in the UK and Australia (NMR, 2011). They are the outcome of deliberate, rigorous observation and reflection on the part of committed practitioners. Having synthesised many instructional rounds and established a composite set of theories of action, I tested them against the research evidence. Here John Hattie's (2009) book *Visible Learning* proved invaluable. Having established the validity and reliability of the theories of action, they were then subject to a further cycle of implementation and reflection. Even more precise specifications are sought to the benefit of student learning. This is the quintessential linkage of the art and science of teaching.

In summary, the theories of action for the teacher established as a result of this process are as listed below. (Hopkins, 2013; NMR, 2011)

1. 'When teachers set learning intentions and use appropriate pace and have a clear and strong narrative about their teaching and curriculum, then students are more secure about their learning, and achievement and understanding is increased.'
2. 'When learning tasks are purposeful, clearly defined, differentiated and challenging, then the more powerful, progressive and precise the learning for all students.'
3. 'When teachers systematically use higher order questioning, the level of student understanding is deepened and their achievement is increased.'
4. 'When teachers consistently use feedback and data on student actions and performance, then behaviour becomes more positive and progress accelerates.'

5. 'When peer assessment and assessment for learning (AfL) are consistently utilised, student engagement, learning and achievement accelerates.'
6. 'If teachers use cooperative group structures/ techniques to mediate between whole class instruction and students carrying out tasks, then the academic performance of the whole class will increase as well as the spirit of collaboration and mutual responsibility.'

It should now be obvious that the use of such evidence from research on teaching can help teachers become more creative in devising effective learning environments for the students. There is a danger that centrally designed curricula can become blueprints that inhibit autonomy in teaching and learning. In this respect the theories of action presented here are **specific rather than prescriptive**. Although they define the nature of the educational encounter, they do so in order to encourage teachers to experiment with the specificity, rather than being bound by the prescription.

### **Myth 6 – The myth that external accountability results in sustained school reform**

The global interest in school reform has accelerated in recent years, partially as a consequence of a system-level desire in many countries to move up the PISA 'league tables'. In many cases this has resulted in a common curriculum of policy options. One of the central features of policy frameworks within education systems worldwide is the introduction of structures and processes for external accountability. Think for example of *No Child Left Behind in the USA*, the 'My School' website in Australia, and league tables, national testing and school inspection in England.

The myth to be exploded here is that the introduction of an external accountability policy will necessarily have a positive and sustained impact on student achievement scores. As with all the other myths there is a grain of truth in the proposition, but it is not a panacea. It is certainly true that such an approach is efficient

in selecting students for elite positions on the basis of competitive examinations. It is also true that the use of external accountability measures in seriously underperforming and dysfunctional schools or education systems will administer a short, sharp, shock – either shaking them out of complacency, or directing their attention to a limited number of measurable goals.

There is a danger that centrally designed curricula can become blueprints that inhibit autonomy in teaching and learning.

The problem is that such top-down strategies have a very limited half-life. Once the school or system has begun to improve and to take ownership of its own development, then the continuing pressure for external accountability becomes oppressive, alienating and counter-productive. The 'levelling off' of literacy achievement in English primary schools in the early 2000s is an example of this phenomenon. Although external accountability may be a useful strategy at the early stages of an improvement process, its continued use will reduce both performance and motivation. Not only this, but such an approach gives little guidance as to how to create more productive, instructional and curriculum pathways for students. This in essence is the myth.

Exploding the myth of external accountability is relatively easy to do. The PISA report, *What Makes a School Successful?* (OECD, 2010) acknowledges that improving countries do use standardised testing, particularly in the early phases of a reform program. However, the findings demonstrate that a higher level of student performance and increased equity – reducing the variation in student achievement – is enhanced when data are used to map the progress of students. The key issue in exploding the myth of external accountability is to point to the crucial idea of data being used **formatively** to create the most effective learning conditions in schools for students.

Michael Fullan, Peter Hill and Carmel Crévola (2006, p 37), in their book *Breakthrough*, identified four key features of classroom practice that ‘would lead to quantum, ongoing improvements in the rate of student learning but, more important, to a transformational change in thinking about teaching’. The features are

1. a set of formative assessment tools tied to the learning objectives of each lesson, which give the teacher access to accurate information on the progress of each student on a daily basis, and which can be administered without undue disruption to normal classroom routines;
2. a method to allow the formative assessment data to be captured in a way that is not time-consuming, with the capacity for analysing the data automatically, and providing a means to convert it into information that is powerful enough to drive instructional decisions – not sometime in the future, but tomorrow;
3. a means of using the assessment information on each student to design and implement lessons that deliver differentiated instruction, and which optimise the effectiveness of classroom teaching; and
4. a built-in means of monitoring and managing learning, of testing what works and of systematically improving the effectiveness of classroom instruction, so that it responds more precisely to the learning needs of each student in the class.

### **Myth 7 – The myth that innovation and networking always add value to school reform**

This myth is a tricky one, for it flies in the face of conventional wisdom. Everywhere we go in this postmodern world of ours we are being encouraged to be innovative, to grasp the future and to embrace transformational change. That is all well and good but, if basic knowledge management practices are not in place, then innovation, which by definition builds on the best of existing knowledge, will be futile. I remember a challenging conversation

with Charles Clarke, who at the time, in 2004, was the Secretary of State for Education in the UK, when I was Chief Adviser on School Standards. He was asking me why teachers did not have the educational equivalent of the *Lancet* (a weekly review of research and current practice) as the medical profession did. I tried to explain, somewhat apologetically, that by and large teaching is not systematically influenced by existing research, let alone conditioned by cutting-edge discoveries. I also added that, sadly, current practice was rarely shared in an actionable form. This was a salutary moment that encouraged me to think and act more deeply in addressing the problem.

There seem to be four interrelated issues here.

- The first is that, at present, teaching cannot be called an evidence-based profession. Although research-based practice is ostensibly a prominent feature of many teacher education, leadership development and school improvement programs, it is not systematically embedded in the day-to-day professional practices of educators across the system.
- Secondly, there is no explicit professional agreement on what is good practice. This problem is compounded or compensated for by ‘faddism’ – a tendency to pick up new or popular ideas that are adopted in a superficial way. When subsequently and predictably they have little impact on student performance they are then eschewed. It is this tendency that leads to the cycle of change and no change in education that is often commented upon.
- Thirdly, most educational research is expressed in a way that is not immediately accessible by teachers. Even when it is of good quality, it is rarely presented in an implementable form.
- Fourthly, and as a consequence, networking and professional learning become largely superficial activities, because the discourse they are designed to engender has nothing substantive on which to focus.

Ben Levin (2010, p 1) has recently made the following similar argument when commenting on the place of innovation and transformation in education reform.

*We hear many calls today for the transformation of schooling; to reshape schools in some entirely new way, and for a greater role for innovation in improving schools ... (My) argument ... is that we should be cautious about embracing transformation and its handmaiden, innovation, as the requirements for schooling. I take the view that the more promising avenue in terms of student outcomes ... would focus instead on improving existing school systems ... This is not an argument against change, but springs from the belief that a focus on innovation and transformation could distract us from what is both possible and desirable in order to pursue goals that may be desirable but are not very possible.*

Like Levin, I am not arguing against innovation or networking *per se* – neither of us is a Luddite! Rather, we both seem to be advocating approaches to improvement that deepen and extend current best practice about what is known to work. Similarly, in terms of networking and professional learning, we advocate the utilisation of approaches that build capacity and extend evidence-based practice. To quote Levin (2010, p 6) again,

*Organizing schools so that we get much more of practices known to be effective and much less of practices known to be ineffective is highly likely to yield more results per unit of effort than is the search for further innovation or for transformation, both of which carry significant risks.*

The critical point here is that in embracing innovation, networking and professional learning, both school and system reform efforts need to be channelled in robust and rigorous ways, to ensure that the transfer of practices that impact most directly on student achievement are at the heart of the matter.

### **Myth 8 – The myth of the contribution of charismatic leadership to school reform**

At first glance this is not much of a myth. Most would agree that the image of the adrenaline-fuelled leader (and this is not a gender specific term), riding a white horse across the plains on his/her way to committing yet another random act of kindness, is at best a 20th century metaphor for leadership. It is Jim Collins (2001), in his book *Good to Great*, who deserves the credit for originally debunking this myth. Although Collins' research focused on companies rather than schools, there are some fascinating comparisons in terms of what 'great' companies are like and how they became great. It is instructive to relate the following two descriptions of great companies to those outstanding schools with which one is familiar. Collins wrote as follows (2001, p 194 and p 195).

*Enduring great companies don't exist merely to deliver returns to shareholders. Indeed, in a truly great company, profits and cash flow become like blood and water to a healthy body. They are absolutely essential for life, but they are not the very point of life.*

and

*Enduring great companies preserve their core values and purpose while their business strategies and operating practices endlessly adapt to a changing world. This is the magical combination of 'preserve the core and stimulate progress'.*

The image of schooling conjured up by these quotations is one of a school and classroom culture of high expectations, where students realise their potential as a consequence of the types of pedagogic and curriculum strategies described in this book. What is more germane for our purposes here, is the type of leadership necessary to enable a school to become great. Collins calls this 'Level 5' leadership. An unattributed online article on Collins' work summarises the five levels as follows.

*The term ‘Level 5’ refers to a five-level hierarchy of qualities. Level 1 relates to individual capability, level 2 to team skills, level 3 to managerial competence and level 4 to leadership as traditionally conceived. Level 5 leaders possess the skills of levels 1 to 4 but also have an ‘extra dimension’: a paradoxical blend of personal humility plus professional will. They are somewhat self-effacing individuals who deflect adulation yet who have an almost stoic resolve to do absolutely whatever it takes to make the company great, channeling their ego needs away from themselves and into the larger goal of building a great company.*

(PR Newswire, 2001)

Collins elaborates as follows.

*It’s not that Level 5 leaders have no ego or self-interest. Indeed, they are incredibly ambitious – but their ambition is first and foremost for the institution, not themselves.*

(2001, p 21)

moral purpose in education is best defined as a resolute failure to accept context as a determinant of academic and social success.

These attributes for school leaders have recently been validated in internationally based research, such as the two-volume OECD (Pont, Nusche and Hopkins, 2008; Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008) study, *Improving School Leadership* and the McKinsey (Barber et al, 2010) study, *Capturing the Leadership Premium: How the World’s Top School Systems are Building Leadership for the Future*. The OECD study asks, rhetorically, ‘School leadership: why does it matter?’ and answers as follows.

- At the school level, leadership can improve teaching and learning by setting objectives and influencing classroom practice.
- At the local level, school leadership can improve equal opportunities by collaborating with other schools and local communities.

- At the system level, school leadership is essential for successful education reform.

Despite this confluence of thinking, a paradox still lurks here. It is that, under certain conditions, particularly when a school or system is in crisis and performing badly, then prescriptive forms of top-down leadership are still necessary while the preconditions for effectiveness are put into place. Finally, it is important to remember that, ultimately, the challenge of leadership, particularly within a systemic context, has great moral depth to it. It addresses directly the learning needs of students, the professional growth of teachers and enhances the role of the school as an agent of social change. As we have seen, moral purpose in education is best defined as a resolute failure to accept context as a determinant of academic and social success. Acting on context and not accepting poverty and social background as necessary determinants of success in schooling is at the heart of the systemic approach to school transformation.

### **Myth 9 – The myth that ‘one size fits all’ in implementing school reform**

Although most would agree that this myth is self-evidently true, ironically it is the one with the most power to derail even the best-intentioned school improvement effort. Because of the top-down and instrumentalist approach so dominant in most school reform efforts, as a global community we have succumbed by-and-large to a single solution approach: this reading scheme; this theory of learning; or the latest textbook. By way of contrast, inside-out school improvement works from careful diagnosis, followed by customisation of strategy to context. Without a degree of professional precision and reflexivity to context, it is understandable why pre-packaged solutions, however good and well-intentioned, end up having a limited effect in terms of student learning.

In our recent review (Hopkins et al, 2011) we noted enthusiastically that those in the field of school and system reform are beginning to recognise and take this issue seriously.

Two examples make the point. In his paper ‘Choosing the wrong drivers for whole system reform’ Michael Fullan (2011) describes how certain popular policy options are implemented, but without any serious consideration of context. The following quotations give a flavour of the argument (Fullan, 2011).

*A ‘wrong driver’ is a deliberate policy force that has little chance of achieving the desired result, while a ‘right driver’ is one that ends up achieving better measurable results for students.*

(p 3)

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

(p 5)

The second example is the recent authoritative McKinsey (Mourshead et al, 2010) report, *How the World’s Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better*. The authors emphasise the importance of contextually and culturally relevant improvement strategies in system reform. It is worth heeding their advice, as follows.

*Each particular stage of the school system improvement journey is associated with a unique set of interventions. Our research suggests all improving systems implement similar sets of interventions to move from one particular performance level to the next, irrespective of culture, geography, politics, or history ... This suggests that systems would do well to learn from those at a similar stage of the journey, rather than from those that are at significantly different levels of performance. It also shows that systems cannot continue to improve by simply doing more of what brought them past success.*

(p 3)

All of this points to the importance of taking seriously the concept of ‘differential approaches’ to school and system reform. This idea was first introduced in our paper ‘Understanding the school’s capacity for development: Growth states and strategies’ (Hopkins, Harris and Jackson, 1997) and further elaborated in my school reform trilogy, *School Improvement for Real* (Hopkins, 2001), *Every School a Great School* (Hopkins, 2007) and *Exploding the Myths of School Reform* (Hopkins, 2013).

In exploding the particular myth that ‘one size fits all’ in school and system reform, the following three points need to be reiterated.

- The first point is that this analysis applies equally to individual schools or groups of schools as it does to national or local governments and systems.
- The second point is that, unfortunately, most of the time single strategies or policy initiatives tend to be worked on discretely, rather than as a set of complementary and mutually supportive policies, as proposed here.
- Third, and critically, the strategies that have been selected need to be precisely aligned to the growth state or performance phase of the school or system.

### **Myth 10 – The myth that market forces drive educational excellence**

The educational policy direction in many developed countries is changing quite dramatically at the present time. There is currently a rapid shift away from the government-managed educational changes of the 1990s and 2000s to far more decentralised systems, based on principles such as ‘autonomy’, ‘choice’ and market forces. In many systems, reasons and forces other than educational ones are driving this trend. The biggest driver is the meltdown in global economic systems since 2008 and the resulting desire from many governments for the ‘small state’. These irresistible forces are also coupled with a genuine belief by many that there is a need to unleash the power of the profession that has been harnessed by too much control.

One hears strong arguments to support such a case, but it is foolish to think that simply dismantling existing system structures and giving unfettered freedoms to schools will by itself raise standards. This is the myth. As we have already seen, the McKinsey study clearly states that

*Differences in what leaders do are not directly related to the level of autonomy they are given.*

(Barber et al, 2010, p 8)

It is clear from international benchmarking studies of school performance and the evidence from Barber et al's study that:

- 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;
- leadership is the crucial factor both in school transformation and system renewal, so investment particularly in principal and leadership training is essential;
- the quality of teaching is the best determinant of student performance, so that any reform framework must address the 'fine motor behaviours' of teachers in the classroom. Top-down approaches have proven ineffective in delivering such authentic professional change;

it is foolish to think that simply dismantling existing system structures and giving unfettered freedoms to schools will by itself raise standards.

- outstanding educational systems find ways of learning from their best and use the diversity within the system strategically, to good advantage;
- the unrestricted reliance on market forces as an educational change strategy inevitably distorts and duplicates provision, and militates against the achievement of those students from the poorest backgrounds.

So, although deregulation and market forces may be the myth, this is by no means an argument for retaining the status quo. It is also clear that sustained educational excellence requires the creation of a new educational landscape, elements of which have already been described.

David Hargreaves (2010, 2011, 2012), in a series of recent 'think pieces', has been putting much intellectual energy into imagining what such a new landscape would look like. In doing so, he has developed the concept of a self-improving system of schools (SISS). Hargreaves (2010, p 5) comments as follows.

*At its core, the notion of a SISS assumes that much (not all) of the responsibility for school improvement is moved from both central and local government and their agencies to the schools. An obvious forerunner in England is local management of schools (LMS), the delegation of financial responsibilities to schools in the 1980s, which is generally regarded as a world-leading success story. However, a SISS is not merely the sum total of self-improving schools. The system element in a SISS consists of clusters of schools accepting responsibility for self-improvement for the cluster as a whole. A SISS embodies a collective responsibility in a way that neither school improvement nor LMS has ever done. In effect this involves the creation of a new intermediary body between the individual school and the local authorities, which are usually seen as the middle tier between central government and the individual school.*

*The architecture of a SISS rests on four main building blocks:*

- capitalising on the benefits of clusters of schools
- adopting a local solutions approach
- stimulating co-construction between schools
- expanding the concept of system leadership

The equivalent of Local Management of Schools (LMS) is probably the ‘self-managing school’ in Australia and ‘charter schools’ in the USA. So, the final myth being exploded is that market forces work in sustaining educational excellence. This has been achieved through making a contrary proposal, around developing more lateral and self-sustaining ways of working that move beyond networking and collaboration, towards systemic capacity building.

### The overarching narrative

Although the artifice of ‘exploding the myths’ is a helpful device in structuring a paper such as this, such an approach has two potential downsides. The first is that the narrative will appear unduly negative and, second, that the argument will become fragmented, by reflecting problems with individual myths rather than presenting a coherent and integrated theory of action. I hope that this is not the case here, and in the coda I intend to illustrate how this heuristic device adds value to what we know about achieving school and system reform.

Discussion of the myths stems from a deep frustration that despite what we know collectively about school and system reform, the potential contained in this knowledge is not realised systematically. This is because, as Fullan says, ‘the wrong drivers are chosen’ and it often occurs because of ineptness, misunderstanding or cultural and bureaucratic hegemony. So, as Machiavelli presciently commented, ‘It seems to me better to follow the real truth of things than an imaginary view of them’. This is what I have attempted to do. The overarching narrative goes something like the following.

1. We know much about school and system reform, as is evidenced here.
2. Unfortunately, this knowledge is often misused and an illusion or myth is generated that leads in unproductive directions and consequently has little impact on the learning and achievement of students.

3. In order to fulfil our moral purpose we must correct the myths and present ‘the real truth of things’.
4. We need then to couch them as theories of action, within an overall strategy for school and system reform.

### Ten key principles

In concluding then, it may be helpful to summarise the key principles that characterise reform efforts in both high-performing educational schools and systems. Each principle has a high degree of operational practicality and is linked to its own theory of action.

1. Ensuring that the achievement and learning of students, expressed as moral purpose, is at the centre of all that teachers do. 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.

*Principle 1: When schools and systems are driven by moral purpose then all students are more likely to fulfil their potential.*

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

*Principle 2: When the focus of policy is on the quality of teaching rather than structural change, then student achievement will increase.*

3. High levels of student learning and achievement will be partially achieved by teacher selection policies to ensure that only



the very best people become educators and educational leaders. Almost by definition, this creates a positive school work culture and high levels of professional practice.

*Principle 3: When schools and teachers are of high quality, poverty is no longer a determinant of educational success.*

4. The development of this professional practice occurs within a system context where there is increasing clarity on the standards implied by the goals set, and the generation of the most appropriate curriculum and teaching strategies necessary to achieve those standards.

*Principle 4: When the focus is on powerful learning, then students will both attain more and develop their cognitive and social skills.*

5. Putting in place appropriate ongoing and sustained professional learning opportunities will help develop a common ‘practice’ of teaching and learning by blending theory, evidence and action through collaborative forms of enquiry.

*Principle 5: When teachers acquire a richer repertoire of pedagogic practice then students’ learning will deepen.*

6. To enable this, procedures are needed to provide formative, ongoing and transparent data (both assessment data and inspection evidence) on the performance of the student, school and system, which facilitate improvements in learning and teaching.

*Principle 6: When data is used to monitor, provide feedback and enhance student performance, then students’ progress will accelerate more quickly.*

7. Student and school performance is enhanced by teachers and leaders ‘going deeper’ and intervening early, following diagnosis that reflects a range of differential strategies based on performance, with targets being set that are related to implementation.

*Principle 7: When teachers and schools go deeper in their search for improvement (rather than adopting fads) then the student learning experience also deepens and outcomes improve.*

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

*Principle 8: When leadership is instructionally focused and widely distributed, then both teachers and students are able to capitalise fully on their capacity to learn and achieve.*

9. Inequities in student performance are addressed through
  - good early education;
  - direct classroom support for those falling behind;
  - high levels of targeted resourcing; and
  - utilising differential strategies at the school level.

*Principle 9: When teachers and leaders employ more precise strategies for teaching, learning and improvement, the whole system benefits.*

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

*Principle 10: When the system as a whole takes student learning seriously then moral purpose is achieved.*

### End note

1. The quotations from Niccolo Machiavelli, in the paper are taken from his philosophical treatise, *The Prince*, originally published in 1532. This work is currently available from a number of sources including, for example, Bantam Classics as a paperback or as a Kindle Edition.

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## About the Author

David Hopkins is Professor Emeritus at the Institute of Education, University of London and Director of Education for the Bright Tribe Trust. An earlier publication of his for CSE/IARTV was *Every school a great school*, Seminar Series Paper 146, August 2005.

## About the Paper

Drawing on themes explored in his 2013 book (also entitled *Exploding the Myths of School Reform*, published by Open University Press, McGraw Hill Education, Berkshire and ACER Press, Melbourne), David Hopkins summarises how the failure of many educational reform efforts to impact on the learning and performance of students has been due to misguided action, based on myths associated with school reform that remain prevalent to the present day. He outlines and comments upon ten myths in particular that he believes constrain realisation of the moral purpose of school and system reform. In contrast to these myths, he also draws on a growing evidence base to summarise ten key principles – each having a high degree of operational practicality and linked to its own theory of action – that characterise more successful reform efforts in high-performing educational schools and systems.

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