

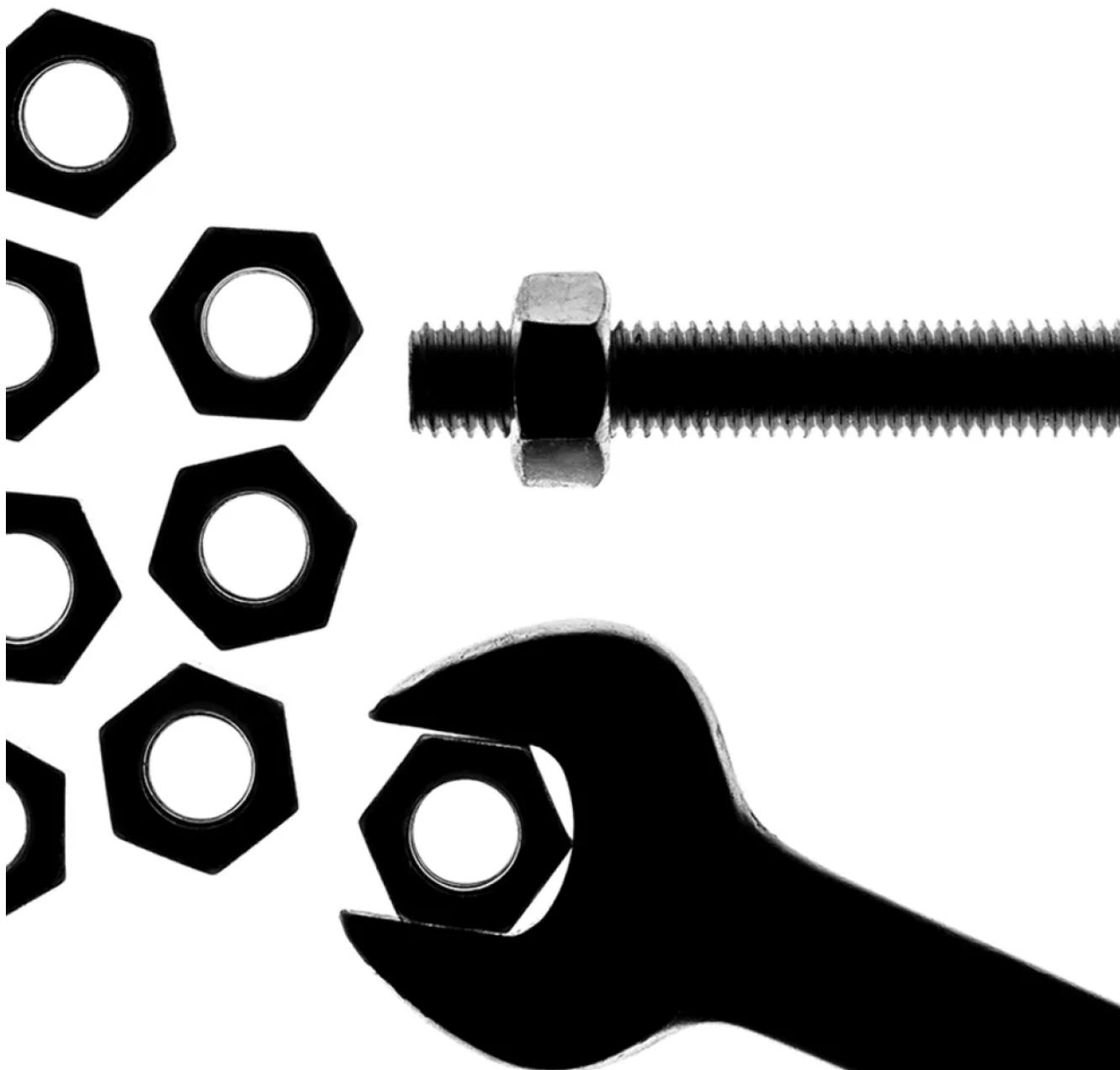
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FEATURE

How to improve a school - and put teachers at the heart of it

Too many school improvement strategies are top-down and disconnected from teaching, international research professor David Hopkins tells Helen Amass

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Helen Amass



In a primary classroom in Bolton, a Year 4 pupil recently summed up an important part of David Hopkins’ philosophy for school improvement.

“In Year 3, if I had a problem, the teacher would tell me the answer,” Hopkins recalls the pupil saying, “but what’s good about being in Year 4 is that, here,

she tells me how to work it out for myself.”

As chair of educational leadership at the University of Greater Manchester and professor emeritus at UCL Institute of Education and the University of Nottingham, Hopkins consults internationally on school and system reform.

He has helped countless school leaders to turn around struggling schools through a commitment to building the capacity that enables school staff to work towards improvement for themselves.

Hopkins’ decades-long career in educational leadership has seen him work as chief adviser to three school standards ministers in the UK, dean of education at the University of Nottingham and a consultant to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Health Organization.

As England introduces new Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence (RISE) teams who will offer support to schools identified as being in need of improvement, *Tes* sits down with Hopkins to find out more about his ideas on school improvement, why leaders need to be wary of “top-down” approaches and what research can tell us about what really helps to make schools better.

***Tes:* When we talk about “school improvement”, what do we mean? Presumably, it’s more complicated than simply raising attainment.**

Hopkins: School improvement involves strategies for building capacity in schools for raising student achievement, but broadly defined.

The two key words there are “capacity” - so, what is the infrastructure and the management arrangements inside the school for improvement - but also “broadly”. So, we are trying to help young people not just to achieve certain

assessment results, but to reach their potential and to broaden their learning capability.

How did you reach this definition?

Back in the summer of 1979, a study came out that changed my life. It was called *Fifteen Thousand Hours: secondary schools and their effects on children* by Michael Rutter and colleagues.

Rutter was a child psychiatrist who had datasets on the IQs and background performance of young people, and access to performance data for 10 secondary schools in London. He and his colleagues began to put this data together and published the first research study that proved that schools made a difference to kids' performance.



Up until that point, the school's influence was seen to be fairly neutral. It was thought to be gender, socioeconomic background, IQ that actually determined performance. But Rutter and his team were able to demonstrate unequivocally that school had an impact for up to about 30 per cent of

measured outcomes.

They also identified some of the factors that affected this. It was about the quality of teaching, the way in which the school was organised, the ethos of the school. The interesting thing was that all these factors were amenable to alteration by the school staff themselves, rather than being constrained by external circumstances.

And this was groundbreaking because, for the first time, we actually began to focus on the school as a unit in order to improve the quality of outcomes for the system overall.

How did you then begin to understand the steps that school staff can take to influence outcomes?

At the time of Rutter's study, I was still quite a young researcher. But I did my PhD around then and, in the early 1980s, I worked with the OECD as a consultant. A group of us felt that, "OK, we know what the features of an effective school are, so why don't we try to work out how we get schools to become more effective?"

The school improvement "movement" came up from there. There was a very big OECD project, called the International School Improvement Project, which I was a chief consultant on. We had about 15 countries involved and began to develop the methodology for doing school improvement.

What are the key principles involved in that methodology?

For me, there are a few absolutely crucial principles that we ignore at our peril.

The first is that schools and systems are always on a developmental continuum. There's a spectrum going from awful to adequate to fair to good to

outstanding, and we have to diagnose where the school or the system is on that continuum because the strategies required to help them improve change depending on where you're starting from.

We've got to be able to get a real sense of where the school is, and then design the approach that moves it on to the next level.

‘You're going to get a quicker result by focusing on pedagogy rather than curriculum’

Another principle we need to pay attention to is the fact that there's a distinction between the functions of an organisation (in this case, a school) that we often miss. Organisational theory suggests there are two functions: one is maintenance, and the other is development.

Can you explain the difference between those two functions?

Maintenance is how you create systems, hierarchies and structures that will make the organisation efficient. In schools, for example, we have budgets, timetables, staffing policies, job descriptions, the curriculum and so on. Typically, these are the things that Ofsted looks at when a school is failing: it's failing because of deficiencies in the maintenance system.

Now, I'm not decrying that. We need to have efficiency in schools. But we also need to have a development function. We need to find ways of bringing new ideas in, and to build that capacity, and to get a stronger purchase on learning.

Of course, you're not going to be doing development all the time. If the school is really struggling, then you have to just repair the maintenance system. But this is all part of this developmental continuum I was talking about.

And then the next principle, which is the biggest one of all, is about the quality of teaching.

Shouldn't it go without saying that improving teaching is an important part of improving schools?

Yes, of course, and it blows me away that this isn't the focus for so many governments.

The evidence is now crystal clear that teachers' microbehaviours and practices in the classroom are what make the difference to kids' performance, both cognitively and emotionally, in terms of their general confidence and wellbeing.

Essentially, there needs to be a focus on what I call the "instructional core". This is the framework we use to link the curriculum to the teaching, the learning skills of pupils and the assessment for learning processes that we utilise. These four elements, linked together, create powerful learning experiences for our students.



Teachers have to use this insight to understand that, and also understand that those four elements come together to create the tasks that students do, because it's the tasks they do that predict their performance. The tasks have to be in the zone of proximal development of the pupil; we've got to create the task right at that margin where the kid is learning.

Now, that sounds a bit theoretical, but it's not. It's essentially practical.

I can take you to schools around the country that are using this well. For example, I run what I call a laboratory school network at the university and two of our primary schools in very deprived circumstances are in the top 2 per cent for performance in the country. This is because of the internal infrastructure that they have developed; the quality of teaching is right. The focus on curriculum, yes, is important, but it is the pedagogic strategy the teachers use that really makes the difference.

You're going to get a quicker result by focusing on pedagogy rather than curriculum because pedagogy is a delivery system for the curriculum. It sounds so simple, but we often don't do that.

You mentioned designing tasks that fall within the zone of proximal development for pupils. What else do we know about how we support teachers to improve their pedagogy?

We now know an awful lot about the effectiveness of different teaching behaviours on student performance. [John Hattie](#) has done remarkably good work in carrying out meta-analyses of different teaching approaches.

Hattie has identified two lists of behaviours: high impact and low impact. The low-impact ones, which barely register in terms of effect size, or even have a negative effect, include approaches that most governments employ: things like performance-related pay, expulsion and class size. All this has virtually no

impact at all.

In the high-impact list are more intricate teacher behaviours about how they generate more metacognitive action in kids, how they create more social awareness, how they give them more confidence. We barely see governments focusing on that column, and that means we're not pulling those ideas into teacher education programmes and CPD programmes.

But the real problem with Hattie's work - and this is not a criticism of him or his work - is that you can read his book *Visible Learning*, and you can understand the meta-analyses he has done, but that alone doesn't make you a better teacher. What you've got to do is take the knowledge Hattie is identifying and put it into what I call "protocols" that teachers can use.

What might one of those protocols look like?

Let's take the example of higher-order questions. It's all very well telling teachers that they need to use them, but they might be thinking, "what the hell is a higher-order question?".

So, one of the things we do to help is to take Bloom's taxonomy and generate question stems at each of the levels of the taxonomy. And then our teachers will have these on their desks to refer to. Over time, they'll develop more facility with them but, initially, that enables them to be more precise about their work.

How do you balance offering teachers that level of support with not stripping them of their autonomy?

There's a difference between specification and prescription. What we need to be doing is helping teachers become more specific about what they're doing.

If we draw on a medical analogy, the great thing about the medical profession

is that it encapsulates the best existing knowledge into a protocol that is changing over time. That's what I try to do with my work: I try to build a capacity at the school level for doing that.

Another medical idea that can work in schools is instructional rounds.

How does that work?

We do this with the schools in our network. It involves one school opening itself up and taking about two dozen teachers from other schools. The host school will open up six classrooms, and teachers are happy for people to come in and just look. The only instruction I give is that there's no judgement or evaluation, just description.

At the end of the morning, the visiting teachers have descriptive data on six classrooms. I take them through an analytic process in which they identify the strategies being utilised across those classrooms. We can then use this as a way of generating some hypotheses about general practice in the school.

‘As a leader, you need to generate a culture where people become intrinsically motivated’

It's not about saying teacher A is better than teacher B, but what does teaching look like in this school? From there, we can develop what I call "theory of action" statements, which will then become the focus for professional development over the next year or two.

We establish peer coaching groups through which teachers support each other to develop their use of protocols based on these statements. It's an ongoing way of working and when you have it in place, the school just takes off.

That's what school improvement is about: building those processes inside the school that allow for real improvement.

What else do school leaders need to understand about school improvement?

You need to have a strategy that is coherent and adapted to context. It's not just committing random acts of kindness, which is how so much "school improvement" happens - advisers driving around the country, going in and having a cup of tea.

Another point is that peer coaching is really important. If you're going to try to increase teacher skill, they've got to first learn what the skill is. They have to see it demonstrated. They have to practise it. They have to have feedback in a workshop setting before they support each other in the classroom.

And, as a leader, you've got to build these professional learning opportunities into the timetable. You also need to generate a culture inside the school where people become intrinsically motivated, rather than extrinsically motivated by Ofsted.

The government in England has recently announced a plan to introduce RISE teams. Do you think this has the potential to be an effective approach?

In principle, yes. But I think it depends on whether they approach it as a capacity-building exercise, or if they adopt top-down ways of working.

I worry about the latter because this is sometimes what we see with multi-academy trusts. I think one of the problems we've got is that we've developed a view on educational reform that is quite accountability oriented, very bureaucratically driven. This is a legacy of the last government, and I worry that there are too many trusts that look like that.

In theory, trusts are a fantastic idea, because you have autonomy to actually work with a group of schools. But if all you've got in your head is top-down ways of working, you aren't building the capacity of schools to improve for themselves.

How do we move away from those top-down approaches?

It doesn't really matter what the external environment is: if you're the CEO of a multi-academy trust, you've got a lot of control, and you can create a microclimate.

You've got to be able to develop a narrative based upon something that is fairly specific, intellectually coherent, but also essentially practical. And you need to link drivers together. There's nothing wrong with breakfast clubs, for example, but that by itself won't do it.

Ultimately, we've got to find ways of developing policies that can link pedagogy to the curriculum, and so on - so we're pulling those different levers inside a whole narrative.

I can take you around the world and show you places where they've been able to do that. They did it in Ontario (in Canada), and to an extent in Alberta, and they certainly did it in Finland. But too often, we just focus on one strategy, which won't do the business.

Hopkins' latest book Unleashing greatness: a strategy for school improvement is available to buy now

Helen Amass



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