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Development of a school improvement framework with broad application in different contexts

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Symposium 71: Implementing a generic school improvement framework: experience of the National School Improvement Tool in Australian settings.

Paper A: Development of a school improvement framework with broad application in different contexts

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Introduction

School improvement has been a focus of attention in Australia for some time, but the publication of results in international testing such as PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) in recent times has heightened awareness of comparisons between Australian students and their peers in other countries (eg. Thomson, Hillman, Wernert, Schmid, Buckley, and Munene, 2012). This paper describes the National School Improvement Tool (ACER, 2012) developed in Australia to support school and system improvement efforts.

Although Australia's performance in PISA has remained above the OECD average in recent years, jurisdictions such as Hong Kong and Shanghai in China, and Singapore and Finland, had significantly higher results than Australia in PISA Reading tests in 2009 and several more had significantly higher results in Mathematics (Thomson, De Bortoli, Nicholas, Hillman, and Buckley, 2010). Overall, Australian students' mean score in PISA reading declined from 528 points in 2000 to 515 in 2009.

PIRLS, which Australia entered for the first time in 2011, is conducted at Year 4 and Year 8, and focuses on purposes for reading, processes of comprehension and reading behaviours and attitudes. Australia's results surprised many educators and led to headlines such as 'A decade of lost action on literacy' (Ferrari, 2012) and calls for a shake-up of teacher training. Many analyses comprised comparison with high-performing countries, such as that in Figure 1, which highlights the significant difference between the proportions of low performing students in Australia and Hong Kong.
Not only is the quality of performance of concern to many in Australia, but so too are the inequalities evident in a country that prides itself on fairness. Performances of subgroups in PISA ranged widely, from indigenous males with lower reading levels and independent school students with higher levels of mathematical literacy, but when socio-economic status was taken into account these differences were not statistically significant. Unlike in Canada, Australia's results are characterised by low equity. The inequality in performance in Australia explained by differences within schools, rather than between schools, is the 5th highest of all OECD countries (OECD, 2007).

This has led state and federal governments in Australia to consider what could be done to improve Australia's overall performance, and to lift performance, first in areas of low socio-economic status and more recently within schools. Options for rewarding individual teachers have been canvassed, but not effectively implemented, as have rewards for schools that improve. The former Australian Government determined to improve Australia's standing in relation to the top-performers by driving 'school improvement', originally with the promise of rewards for schools demonstrating improved results. ACER was asked to provide advice on ways of measuring and rewarding schools (Masters 2012b) and suggested that 'practice-based measures’ rather than ‘outcomes-based measures’ were needed.

As Fullan (2011, p. 11) argues, 'High-stakes accountability will only motivate a small percentage of teachers and, even if motivated, only a minority will know what changes to make in instruction to get better results'. Few school communities actually know what to do to improve their results, and as Masters (2012b) observes, there are currently no agreed practice-based measures of school performance or improvement based on the quality of teaching or of school leadership. In the absence of practice-based measures, comparative data from national and international test results are used to motivate improvement at school and system levels. However Elmore (2008) suggests that giving people in schools more data does not necessarily improve their practice.

**Identifying practices that influence school improvement**

The need to identify successful behaviours underpinned an empirical study in the state of Victoria (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009), presented at ICSEI (Hartnell-Young, 2010). It described the behaviours that were most common in...
schools that were performing better than expected in relation to their socio-economic status. The most common behaviours were:

- using data
- coaching, mentoring and sharing expertise
- raising staff expectations of students
- establishing and aligning vision, values and goals
- working in teams
- aligning professional learning
- assigning staff to key priority areas
- focusing on literacy and numeracy
- establishing partnerships (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009, p. 3).

The paper concluded by asking how transferable these behaviours could be, to lead to improvements in more schools. It is intended that future research into the use of the National School Improvement Tool will consider this question.

The National School Improvement Tool (ACER, 2012) is based on a synthesis of extensive school improvement and effectiveness literature (eg. Sammons, Hillman, and Mortimore, 1995; Townsend, 2007). The broad term 'leadership' is often invoked as a prerequisite to achieving improvement. Indeed in the work described in this paper strong leadership is expected, echoing Grenny et al: 'What qualifies people to be called leaders is their capacity to influence others to change their behaviour in order to achieve important results' (Grenny et al 2013, p. 6). Masters (2012a) found that schools that make significant improvements in student achievement are led by people with a passion for improvement, who adopt a 'no excuses' policy and drive an explicit agenda.

Therefore, while direct measures of student outcomes are essential to all school improvement efforts, this Tool recognises that ‘school improvement’ fundamentally means improving what a school does on a daily basis. It deliberately does not describe everything that effective schools do, but focuses on those practices that are most directly related to school-wide improvements, and thus outcomes for students. In this sense, the Tool can be thought of as a core element of more comprehensive school improvement programs, frameworks and initiatives.

The Tool is designed to assist schools to review and reflect on their efforts to improve the quality of classroom teaching and learning, to support targeted planning. It facilitates school-wide conversations – including with parents and families, school governing bodies, local communities and students themselves – about aspects of current practice, areas for improvement and evidence that progress is being made.

It consists of nine inter-related ‘domains’. These are:

- An explicit improvement agenda
- Analysis and discussion of data
- A culture that promotes learning
- Targeted use of school resources
- An expert teaching team
• Systematic curriculum delivery
• Differentiated teaching and learning
• Effective pedagogical practices
• School-community partnerships

Although it has been designed to give feedback in relation to each domain separately, experience suggests that the most effective way to use the Tool is to make observations and gather evidence broadly about a school’s practices before focusing on individual domains. Schools may then decide to give priority to particular domains in their improvement efforts.

Within each domain is the set of performance levels: ‘Low’, ‘Medium’, ‘High’ and ‘Outstanding’. They are presented as descriptors rather than quantitative measures. For example in Domain 1: an explicit school improvement agenda, an ‘Outstanding’ school would be one using the following practices:

The school leadership group, including, where appropriate, the governing council, has developed and is driving an explicit and detailed local school improvement agenda. This agenda is expressed in terms of specific improvements sought in student performances, is aligned with national and/or system-wide improvement priorities and includes clear targets with accompanying timelines which are rigorously actioned.

The school improvement agenda has been effective in focusing, and to some extent narrowing and sharpening, the whole school’s attention on core learning priorities.

There is a strong and optimistic commitment by all staff to the school improvement strategy and a clear belief that further improvement is possible. Teachers take responsibility for changes in practice required to achieve school targets and are using data on a regular basis to monitor the effectiveness of their own efforts to meet those targets (ACER, 2012, p. 3).

Here can be seen an improvement agenda owned and understood across the school, including governance, management and teaching personnel. The agenda involves a plan with clear targets and timelines.

In contrast, a low-performing school would be more focused on short-term issues and may have a culture of low expectations of its students. It is described thus:

There is no obvious plan for improving on current achievement levels. School leaders appear to be more focused on day-to-day operational matters than on analysing and understanding school data, setting targets for whole-school or communicating an improvement agenda to the school community.

Minimal attention is paid to data and there is very limited communication of school results or of intentions for improvement to parents, families and the wider school community.

Expectations for significant school improvement are low and staff tend to ‘explain’ current achievement levels in terms of students’ socioeconomic backgrounds and/or geographical location. There is little evidence that the staff of the school have a shared commitment to improving outcomes for every student,
and this appears to be contributing to a culture of under performance. There is little evidence that the school is looking to external sources to identify evidence-based strategies for improvement (ACER, 2012, p. 3).

Those who conduct a school review, whether they be the leadership team or an external reviewer, should use available evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, to come to a description of where the school sits at a point in time. They should refrain from subjective judgements. Multiple reviewers can moderate their ratings based on the evidence, which itself provides a base line for improvement planning. Marshall (2014) describes how peer reviews have been conducted by government school principals selected for the role in the state of Queensland. Over 1200 schools have been reviewed, and analyses suggest that these reviews could lead to useful practice-based measures (Masters, 2012b). Feedback across the country indicates that having a clear framework and involving the principal and leadership team are essential aspects of the process, and in all cases, it is clear that each school has control over the results of the review process to develop its plan.

In contrast to the Queensland example, Hassell (2014) shows how three very different independent schools in Western Australia have used the framework of the National School Improvement Tool for self review. In his examples, specific domains are selected for attention, rather than every domain in the Tool. It will be important to follow the progress of these schools to see how effective such a focus can be.

It is too early as yet to observe results in terms of outcomes of international testing. In December 2012, the Education Ministers of all states and territories in Australia endorsed the National School Improvement Tool as a very useful framework for reviewing current practice and planning for improvement. While a new government has since been elected, the Tool is likely to remain important if, at the school level, it continues to be seen as independent, generic and transferable, and intended to drive school improvement through school review, planning and implementation of a school improvement plan.

References


