

**Ongoing Discussion “Thought Piece”**

*Questioning Our Systems of Schooling*

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June 22<sup>nd</sup> & 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016

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LEADING IMPROVEMENT, SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT, WORKING ON THE SYSTEM

# WHAT THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GURUS ARE NOT YET TALKING ABOUT

MARCH 11, 2015 | BLOGADMIN | 1 COMMENT

Over the past 15 years the conversations about school improvement have been changing.

Key observations about school improvement, which were not discussed at the turn of the millennium, are now clearly on the agenda.

However, there are still critical elements that are not yet part of this dialogue. This post reflects upon these important conversations.

## What is being talked about

Items now on the agenda include:

- **The systemic nature of school systems.** There is growing awareness of the interconnectedness

that exists among the component parts of these complex social systems. These components need to work together if the system is to be optimised towards its aim.

- **Students' learning as the aim**, rather than teachers' teaching. This may seem a pedantic distinction, yet it profoundly changes the emphasis in dialogue, and thereby the focus of improvement efforts: from educational policy right through to the classroom.
- **Our systems of school education are not meeting the needs of significant proportion of students.** Not only is the system failing our more disadvantaged students, dissatisfaction is widespread and evident in the perceptions of students, teachers and families. Furthermore, in Australia at least, the performance of the education system has largely flat-lined over the past decade, in spite of significantly increased resources. There are pockets of excellence and dramatic improvement, but across the system improvement progress is glacial.
- **The use of data to inform improvement.** With the development of national testing in Australia, and elsewhere, there is now systemic learning data that stimulates and informs conversations and debate. Like it or not, these data are here to stay, and they continue to inform the debate about school improvement.

The organisational improvement theory, derived primarily from the work of **Dr. W Edwards Deming**, leads directly to each of these observations. They have been part of our conversations with friends, clients and colleagues for over a decade. We are encouraged that the significance of these issues and opportunities is now recognised.

## What is yet to be talked about

Improvement theory also points to other key opportunities that are not yet common in dialogue about school improvement.

### Student contribution to school improvement



*Students have a lot to contribute*

**It is only students who truly know what helps and hinders their learning.**

Unless their insight is accessed, acknowledged and acted upon, attempts to improve learning are likely to be misguided. Furthermore, if all students are to benefit, this action needs to be taken regularly at the local level, in each and every classroom. **Simple tools**, such as the **Parking Lot** and **Force-field Analysis**, provide mechanisms that enable this from pre-school to senior high school levels.

### Students can contribute significantly to improving the operation of the school.

Some schools emphasise 'student voice' through mechanisms such as Student Representative Councils and Student Leaders. These process, while important, are in no way sufficient. A much greater opportunity lies in having students skilled and experienced in leading and participating in improvement project teams. These teams can apply the **Plan-Do-Study-Act learning cycle** to directly address opportunities to improve the school. Not only does this approach build the capability of students to personally contribute to improvement (a capability that can be of great benefit to them in their future), it also builds student ownership of the school and classroom while relieving the burden on school leaders, administrators and teachers.

### Too much *what*, not enough *how*



There is far too much discussion of *what* excellence in schools looks like, at the expense of *how* schools might achieve it.

Knowing **what** to improve is not sufficient. We must also know **how** to improve it. Copying others' examples of good practice rarely delivers sustainable improvement. Schools can learn from others' good practice, but each school must develop and test its own theory for improvement. The **Plan-Do-Study-Act improvement cycle** and the associated **Quality Learning tools** provide the 'how to' for developing and testing a theory for improvement.

These two observations, which remain to be discovered by leaders of the school improvement

movement, hold the most significant promise for delivering demonstrable and continual school improvement.

*Note: Our thanks to Hallett Cove R-12 School, South Australia, for the images, which were taken during QLA facilitated Student Improvement Team workshops in 2014.*



◀ DEMING'S PROFOUND KNOWLEDGE    ◀ PLAN DO STUDY ACT    ◀ STAKEHOLDERS    ◀ SYSTEMS    ◀ THEORY

## ONE THOUGHT ON “WHAT THE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GURUS ARE NOT YET TALKING ABOUT”

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## Extract from Appendix 3: Principle-based questions we might ask of our schools and systems of schooling

Theme	Principle-based questions	What to listen for in the response
Direction	<p><b>What are the purpose and vision of the system?</b> How were these created and agreed? When were they last updated? How are they used?</p>	Is there a current and mutually agreed statement of direction that is being used on a daily basis to align effort and guide decision making and action at all levels?
	<p><b>What are the desired values and behaviours of the system?</b> How were these created and agreed? When were they last updated? How are they used?</p>	Are aspirational behaviours and values mutually agreed and explicit? To what degree are these promoted and used to ensure productive interactions and supportive relationships?
	<p><b>What are the principles that underpin the system's philosophy for learning and improvement?</b> How were these derived? How are they used?</p>	In what theory is the improvement approach based? How does the theory align with the principles outlined in this book?
Leading Improvement	<p><b>What is the system leader's current approach to bringing about improvement?</b> What are the current priorities for improvement? How were these selected? How are key stakeholders involved? How is it going? How do you know? Can you show me?</p>	Is there an explicit improvement process in use by the system leader? Do they have a robust evidence-based process for identifying and prioritising improvement opportunities? Is improvement actually happening?
	<p><b>What role does the system leader play in school and classroom improvement?</b> What is the role of the system leader?</p>	To what degree are leaders engaged in managing and improving the processes for which they are responsible? Do they see this as their role?
	<p><b>What are you doing, personally, to improve processes and relationships?</b></p>	To what degree is the individual engaged in managing and improving the processes for which they are responsible? How are they seeking to improve the quality of relationships?
	<p><b>How do students contribute to school and classroom improvement?</b></p>	Are students meaningfully engaged in improvement activities?

Theme	Principle-based questions	What to listen for in the response
Student Learning	<p><b>What does the system expect students to learn while at school?</b>                      How were these expectations developed?                      Where is this documented?                      How are they used?                      How is the system progressing towards achieving these outcomes?</p>	<p>Is there a clearly defined graduate profile for each school? To what degree does it reflect the current views of the whole school community? To what degree is it being used to guide curriculum decisions?                      Is the school serious about achieving it and measuring progress along the way?</p>
	<p><b>How are students supported to take responsibility for their learning?</b>                      How do they know what they are seeking to learn?                      How do they track their progress?</p>	<p>To what degree are students responsible for their own learning — planning, setting goals, self-assessing their learning and monitoring progress over time? Do students have to wait for the teacher to tell them what to do next? Are they actively engaged in self-assessment?</p>
	<p><b>How are students supported to learn at their own pace?</b>                      By what method?</p>	<p>Are students required to keep up, or are there student-directed processes that support them to learn whatever they need to learn next?</p>
	<p><b>How does the system deal with variation in students' prior learning and current ability levels?</b></p>	<p>How does the system manage variation? How does it support all students to learn? How do students support one another in their learning? Is there evidence of tampering?</p>
Teacher Professional Learning	<p><b>What is the process for teacher professional learning?</b>                      How are their learning priorities determined?</p>	<p>To what degree are teachers continually learning? Are teacher learning priorities established with reference to the individual needs of the teacher (evidence based) and those of the school as a whole? Is professional learning linked to the individual performance and development process?</p>
Process Management	<p><b>How are the key processes identified and documented?</b>                      How are these processes improved over time?                      How are people supported in their efforts to enact the agreed processes?</p>	<p>Does the system/school/classroom pay attention to identifying, documenting and following agreed processes? How is process documentation made available to those who need it? To what degree are those who use the process engaged in its ongoing review and improvement? Are there processes to document, train, and coach?</p>

Theme	Principle-based questions	What to listen for in the response
Performance Management	<p><b>How does the system identify and respond to underperformance of schools/principals/teachers/students?</b></p>	<p>Is there a focus upon improving the system as a whole, or simply chopping the tail of the distribution? Is there a focus on systemic improvement, or is the focus on fixing individuals?</p>
	<p><b>What is the system approach to the use of rewards, punishments and consequences?</b></p>	<p>What is the role of extrinsic motivators?</p>
	<p><b>How are individuals in the system recognised for their efforts, contributions and achievements?</b> By what process does this occur?</p>	<p>To what degree does recognition of individuals play a role in building intrinsic motivation? How is recognition distinguished from praise? How is recognition distinguished from rewards and other extrinsic motivators?</p>

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Michael is passionate about improving the quality of learning in school education systems.

Working as a telecommunications engineer, Michael came across the work of Deming and others seeking to improve quality and productivity during the 1980s. He shifted his focus from engineering to quality improvement and moved to the Australian Quality Council, where he consulted in quality improvement to a variety of clients ranging from small businesses to large corporations and government agencies. He first met Myron Tribus and David Langford during this time.

In 1996, Michael was instrumental in establishing and responsible for leading the Australian Quality Council *Quality in Schools* initiative. Initially a joint initiative of the Victorian Department of Education and the AQC, it was later adopted by the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services. These programs were to involve over 500 schools and preschools in the five years between 1997 and 2003.

In 2002 Michael established Quality Learning Australasia (QLA). QLA works almost exclusively in the schools sector, serving over three hundred schools in Victoria, South Australia, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. QLA designs and delivers professional development interventions for school leaders and teachers seeking demonstrable and sustainable improvements in school performance and the quality of school life. QLA also offers a range of support resources through the website [www.qla.com.au](http://www.qla.com.au) including papers, videos, examples and templates – most of which are free of charge.

During nearly twenty years working with school systems, Michael has repeatedly observed that schools derive significant benefits from the adoption of a structured approach to improvement.

*Improving Learning: A how-to guide for school improvement*, written by Michael King and Dr Jane Kovacs, was published in August 2015. *Improving Learning* provides a comprehensive explanation of the quality learning theory and practices applied in a school setting.

In addition to undergraduate and graduate degrees in Education, Michael has earned his MBA, as well as graduate diploma in Science, with an emphasis in statistics.

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