

 **Pathways Research Series:**  
**Understanding Effective School Improvement**

# **School Improvement and School Effectiveness in Context**

**Written by Susila Davis and Pamela Sammons**

# Contents

**School improvement and school effectiveness: the differences ..... 2**

**Potential connections between school improvement and school effectiveness..... 4**

**Recognising improvement.. 5**

*“It is only when school effectiveness research is merged with what is known about school improvement, planned change and staff development, that schools and teachers can be empowered and supported in their growth towards effectiveness.”<sup>26</sup>*



## About the authors

**Susila Davis** is currently studying for a doctorate in education at the University of Oxford. Her focus is on practitioner engagement with school improvement and *Pathways*. Her other research areas involve youth programmes and alternative education provision. Susila was also a research and data analyst for several years at the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust.



**Professor Pamela Sammons** is a professor of education at the University of Oxford. Pam has been involved in educational research for the last 30 years with a special focus on the topics of school effectiveness and improvement, leadership and equity in education. She spent 11 years at the Institute of Education at the University of London (1993–2004) and she has acted as a consultant on school effectiveness and improvement to the Department for Education and Ofsted.



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# School improvement and school effectiveness: the differences

Here we explore the main conceptual distinctions between school improvement and school effectiveness as highlighted below.<sup>1</sup>

| Characteristics <sup>2</sup>                                                                                                                                                                            | School effectiveness                                      | School improvement                                        |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Foci</b>                                                                                                                                                                                             | Schools and the organisation as an entity                 | Teacher and school processes                              |
| <b>Envisaged outcomes</b>                                                                                                                                                                               | Data-driven, emphasis on outcomes                         | Empirical evaluation of changes' effects                  |
| <b>Orientation</b>                                                                                                                                                                                      | Quantitative                                              | Qualitative                                               |
| <b>Response to change strategies</b>                                                                                                                                                                    | Less <sup>3</sup> knowledge about how to implement change | More <sup>4</sup> concerned with change in schools        |
| <b>Prime concern</b>                                                                                                                                                                                    | Change in pupil outcomes                                  | Journey of school improvement rather than its destination |
| <b>Period of investigation</b>                                                                                                                                                                          | More concerned with schools at one point in time          | Schools as changing                                       |
| <b>Knowledge base</b>                                                                                                                                                                                   | Research knowledge                                        | Practitioner knowledge                                    |
| A summary of the different, but potentially linked, traditions of school effectiveness and school improvement <sup>5</sup> (adapted from original table and enhancements made as indicated in endnotes) |                                                           |                                                           |

It is interesting to note that the school improvement paradigm went through a period of 'evolution' from the 1960s to 1980s and emerged with the above characteristics.<sup>6</sup> It might be surprising to find that school improvement research started out at the opposite end of the spectrum and developed into its current form over time. In the 1960s, for example, school improvement was seen as a more 'elite', quantitative outcome-based approach. The movement started to shift with the realisation that teacher engagement in such initiatives was relatively low and participation seemed dominated more by outside observers and experts.<sup>7</sup> This saw a move into more practitioner-led approaches that eventually began to question and evaluate improvement processes.

We should also consider here the role of inspection in school improvement processes. A study in 2004 suggested that while Ofsted has attracted some criticism over the years, inspection has played an important role as a "catalyst for improvement," particularly in weaker schools. The same research saw significant improvements in the "observed quality of teaching and learning, educational standards, and leadership and management across the education system."<sup>8</sup> Pupils and parents that participated in the study indicated that inspection plays a key role in keeping users informed about education service provision and promoting public confidence.<sup>9</sup>

## View from the field

A recent study by Ofsted into outstanding primary and preschool providers working in challenging circumstances drew together some of the defining characteristics:<sup>10</sup>

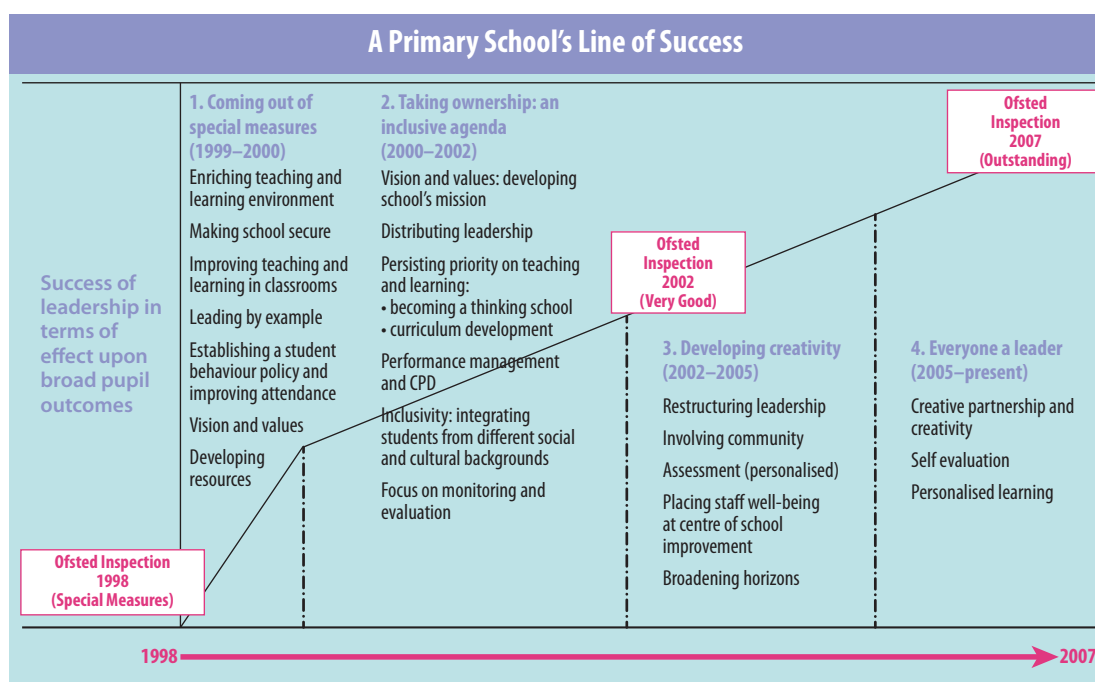
- Schools were seen to provide affection, stability and a purposeful and structured environment.
- Children's self-belief was built and rebuilt.
- Children were taught skills that allowed them to learn for themselves.
- Children were given opportunities, responsibility and trust in a humanising and stimulating environment.
- Children's views were listened to and valued.
- There were close ties with parents, families and communities and partnership-working.
- They ensured that children "progressed as fast as possible and achieved as much as possible (outperforming both similar schools and many with fewer challenges)."
- The child was at the centre of all endeavours; high aspirations, expectations and achievement underpinned these schools' work.

The key factors for success were:

- "A strong and caring ethos and commitment to the children from all staff, coupled with a genuine desire to achieve the very best for our children"
- a very positive 'can-do' culture where praise and encouragement prevail and self-esteem is high
- outstanding teaching by consistently high-quality staff who show great commitment and passion
- a constant focus on maintaining and improving standards of attainment, emphasising the systematic development of basic literacy and numeracy skills
- high-quality planning, assessment and targeted intervention to enable all children to achieve the best they can
- high-quality leadership: the majority of headteachers appeared to "spread the credit for success widely."

The diagram (right) plots a particular path taken by a primary school in its journey of educational change. The school was placed in special measures in 1999 and saw a shift in leadership, including the setting out of the school's mission, vision and values. Processes around creating an environment built on distributed leadership, promoting professional development and a focus on teaching and learning are also highlighted.

**Figure 1: Findings from a study of "academically improved and effective schools in England" showing one school's 'line of success' or improvement path<sup>11</sup>**



## Potential connections between school improvement and school effectiveness

The forging of ties between the traditions of school improvement and school effectiveness is and has been a contentious issue, primarily as the two enterprises have fairly diverse aims and knowledge bases. School effectiveness is seen to travel from top to bottom or outside in, favouring researcher knowledge over practitioner experience. On the other hand, school improvement appears to constantly look for ways to change the system, working from inside out,<sup>12</sup> attempting to examine the events and relationships that represent a school's inner 'engineering'. However, with regard to school effectiveness and its focus on student outcomes, the perhaps still rather faint 'elephant in the room' has been recognised. How could practitioners understand the 'effectiveness' of a school if there was a lack of knowledge surrounding the sequence of events and the role they play in changing student outcomes? This would include the voices of the practitioners and students treading that path and charting of the school's educational practices and processes, combined with the complex consequences of human interaction and networks that may have evolved and facilitated the outcomes over time. Crucially, by the 1980s, school improvement also evolved into something more than a 'travelogue' of journeys. Presenting itself was a rare opportunity for schools to take a step back and evaluate the processes and strategies for improvement that had just been mapped and catalogued.<sup>13</sup> The 1990s saw a new paradigm emerge called 'Effective School Improvement', which was defined as:

*“planned educational change that enhances student learning outcomes as well as the school's capacity for managing change.”<sup>14</sup>*

In this combined sphere there are two primary criteria: one based on effectiveness and the other improvement. The effectiveness criterion asks: “Does the school achieve better student outcomes?”<sup>15</sup> The improvement criterion poses: “Does the school manage change successfully?”<sup>16</sup>

One study proposed the following framework based on the principles of effective school improvement:<sup>17</sup>

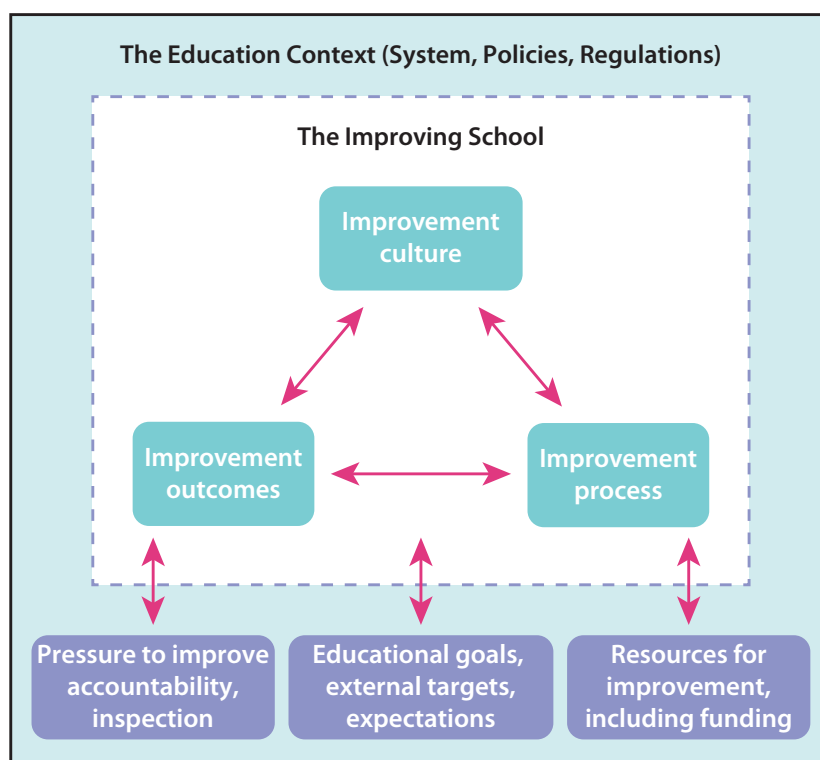
- 1 “To what extent do the student outcomes provide evidence for the school's effectiveness in attaining its goals?”
- 2 To what extent do the intermediate outcomes provide evidence for the attainment of the school's improvement goals?
- 3 To what extent do the students show increased engagement with their own learning and their learning environment?
- 4 To what extent does the curriculum in the classrooms contribute to the school's attainment of students' goals?
- 5 To what extent does the cycle of improvement planning, implementation, evaluation and feedback contribute to the school's attainment of its improvement goals?
- 6 To what extent does the school's curriculum – where applicable – contribute to the effectiveness of the classroom curriculum?
- 7 To what extent does the school's organisation contribute to the attainment of intermediate improvement goals and students' goals?
- 8 To what extent does parental choice and involvement contribute to the school's responsiveness and to its attainment of intermediate improvement goals and students' goals?
- 9 To what extent does the learning by the school organisation contribute to the school's management of change, i.e. to the attainment of the intermediate improvement goals?
- 10 To what extent do external change agents contribute to the school's attainment of intermediate improvement goals?
- 11 To what extent do the contextual characteristics allow for, stimulate, or hinder effective school improvement, i.e. the attainment of intermediate improvement goals and of the students' goals? For instance: to what extent does the National Curriculum – where applicable – allow for, stimulate, or hinder effective school improvement?”

The same study proposes a “comprehensive framework for effective school improvement” that is described as neither fully descriptive nor fully prescriptive.<sup>18</sup> For practitioners, the framework is seen as a useful tool in the design and implementation of school improvement projects within individual institutions.

The framework outlines the different influences on educational practice, both potentially positive and negative. Most importantly, it may act as a catalyst for practitioner discussion, initiating debate and providing opportunities to evaluate current and past practice and plot the future.<sup>19</sup>

## Recognising improvement

**Figure 2: Comprehensive framework for effective school improvement (adapted from the comprehensive framework for effective school improvement original graphic<sup>20</sup>)**



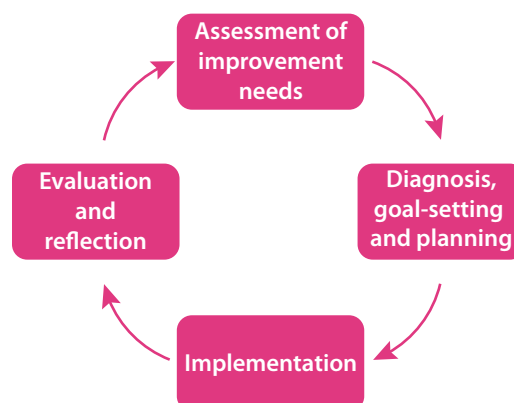
The diagram above demonstrates that the improving school is firmly embedded within, and influenced by, the educational settings of a particular country and associated policies (represented by the perforated line surrounding the school).<sup>21</sup>

From past research across a number of international contexts, the ‘improvement culture’ was found to encompass the following features:<sup>22</sup>

- internal pressure to improve
- autonomy used by schools
- shared vision at different levels of the school
- willingness to become a learning organisation
- improvement history
- ownership of the improvement initiative
- leadership
- staff stability
- time available to improve.

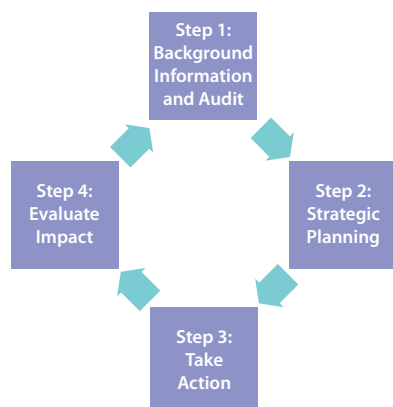
‘Improvement processes’ may not be discrete phases but rather overlapping phases. Figure 3 shows the cycle of how improvement processes overlap:<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 3: ‘Improvement processes’ cycle formulated from international research**



These phases can be seen to correspond closely with what is expected from an improvement system that incorporates a cyclical process of data gathering, planning of next steps, implementation followed by self-evaluation and reflection. As observed earlier, this approach also corresponds with the proposed *Pathways* four-step system below.

**Figure 4: Pathways four-step system (reproduced from original graphic)**



The cyclical, self-evaluative approach provides opportunities for practitioners to assess student outcomes while examining the processes and interactions that played a role in reaching those outcomes. One key learning point that emerged from previous research is that “a clear and practical focus for

development is linked to simultaneous work on the internal conditions within the school.”<sup>24</sup> The reflection phase may involve a collective search for meanings and clarity, a period of system refinement and activities that allow practitioners to monitor progress and enhance their professional judgement.<sup>25</sup>

*“It is only when school effectiveness research is merged with what is known about school improvement, planned change and staff development, that schools and teachers can be empowered and supported in their growth towards effectiveness.”*<sup>26</sup>

‘Improvement goals’ refers mainly to ‘goals’. Research indicates that schools who express aspirations to improve generally pursue two types of goal:<sup>27</sup>

- 1 Goals explicitly presented in the form of student outcomes. These may refer to knowledge, skills and attitudes and others, such as student well-being, beyond cognitive achievement.
- 2 Goals focused on change, which may include elements such as school organisation, teacher or student behaviour and so on. The principle here is that improvement efforts can also be judged by the initiation of change that may enhance student outcomes.

## View from the field

Strategies employed by schools in a project called ‘Improving the Quality of Education for All (IQEA)’.<sup>28</sup>

| Staff development                                                                                                                                                                                     | Inquiry and reflection                                                                                                                                                                                        | Leadership                                                                                                                                                                           | Coordination                                                                                                                                                                                 | Planning                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Focus on both individual teacher and school development</li> <li>→ Teacher involvement in peers’ teaching</li> <li>→ Some use of external support</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Search for increased clarity and meanings</li> <li>→ Reflection and review activities used to enhance teacher professional judgement and monitor progress</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Staff throughout the school encouraged to adopt leadership roles</li> <li>→ Temporary working or special interest groups created</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Links made between formal and informal structures</li> <li>→ ‘Images of success’ created</li> <li>→ Efforts focused to maintain momentum</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Planning processes used to ‘legitimise’ and coordinate action</li> <li>→ Resources for school improvement are specifically allocated</li> </ul> |

## Endnotes

- 1 Reynolds, D., Hopkins, D. and Stoll, L. (1993) 'Linking School Effectiveness Knowledge and School Improvement Practice: Towards a Synergy', *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 4(1), pp. 37–58.
- 2 Additional column added to categorise characteristics by table row
- 3 Changed from 'lack of'
- 4 Changed from 'exclusively'
- 5 Reynolds, D., Hopkins, D. and Stoll, L. (1993) Op. cit.
- 6 Reynolds, D., Hopkins, D. and Stoll, L. (1993) Op. cit.
- 7 Reynolds, D., Hopkins, D. and Stoll, L. (1993) Op. cit.
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- 12 Reynolds, D., Hopkins, D. and Stoll, L. (1993) Op. cit.
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- 19 Creemers, B. P. M., Stoll, L. and Reezigt, G. (2007) Op. cit.
- 20 Creemers, B. P. M., Stoll, L. and Reezigt, G. (2007) Op. cit.
- 21 Creemers, B. P. M., Stoll, L. and Reezigt, G. (2007) Op. cit.
- 22 Creemers, B. P. M., Stoll, L. and Reezigt, G. (2007) Op. cit.
- 23 Creemers, B. P. M., Stoll, L. and Reezigt, G. (2007) Op. cit.
- 24 Reynolds, D., Hopkins, D. and Stoll, L. (1993) Op. cit.
- 25 Ainscow, M. and Hopkins, D. (1992) 'Aboard the moving school', *Educational Leadership*, 50(3), pp. 79–81.  
Reynolds, D., Hopkins, D. and Stoll, L. (1993) Op. cit.
- 26 Stoll, L. (1992) 'Teacher Growth in the Effective School,' In: Fullan, M. and Hargreaves, A. (eds.) *Teacher Development and Educational Change*, London: RoutledgeFalmer, pp. 104–122.
- 27 Hopkins, D. (1995) 'Towards effective school improvement', *School effectiveness and School Improvement*, 6(3), pp. 265–274.
- 28 Reynolds, D., Hopkins, D. and Stoll, L. (1993) Op. cit.