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About the author

Tony Attwood has worked as both a teacher and as university lecturer, and as a writer on educational matters.

In the late 1990s he undertook research into the ways in which schools could engage in school improvement without the input of additional cash, or the involvement of outside consultants or advisers.

In the early 21st century his particular interest in special needs led him to set up the Dyscalculia Centre which subsequently has evolved a range of materials for dyscalculic pupils, students and adults. He also developed an on-line diagnostic test for dyscalculia that is widely used in the UK and overseas by schools, hospitals and prison services, and which has been used by researchers at the University of Oxford to develop their understanding of the effects of dyscalculia.

In 2006 Tony was instrumental in the formation of the School of Educational Administration and Management which, with funding from the Department of Trade and Industry and support from the School of Education at the University of Northampton, set out to examine how schools might benefit from having an understanding of the ways in which businesses establish ever more efficient ways of working.

Since then the SEAM has run a series of courses on efficiency, time management and the ways in which the organisation of administration fundamentally affects the success or otherwise of schools.

In 2008 he was awarded a Fellowship by the Institute of Administrative Management in recognition of his work in establishing the SEAM and its courses.

Preface

This report starts by reviewing what has happened in the past as a way of understanding the present and deciding what to do in the future.

There is, I feel, a certain logic in that approach, because it answers one question that is raised over and over again:

“If there is such a simple way of improving schools from within, without huge amounts of expenditure on external consultants, new equipment and the like, and if in fact it can be done without spending any new money at all, why isn’t everyone doing it?”

Reading this report from the start explains how we got to where we are today, gives an answer to that question, and leads directly into the reforms that are outlined herein.

But if you want to get to the nub of the reforms quickly, you can do so - knowing of course that once that nagging question, “if this really works, why isn’t everyone doing it?” reasserts itself, you can come back and read the report from the beginning.

In essence, the point in this report is that the best way to reform a school is to have everyone in the staff working with you in an agreed direction. Unfortunately this is extremely time consuming, difficult to monitor, and liable to break down if you have some colleagues whose response is, “I think my way is better”.

Thus an alternative approach was sought, and was revealed in one academic research paper. In essence the answer is to reform one department at a time, starting with the worst, or one of the worst. The mechanism for that reform process is described from Part 2: Section 5: The Culture of the School

If you start at this point you will get the essence of how the system that generates the ever improving school works.

Personally, I do hope you have time to read this report from the start, or if you do skip forward to Part 2 section 5 (page 31) that you will at a later date have a chance to read the earlier sections. If you really want to cut to the chase then jump to Part 2 Section 8 (page 42).

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2:2 The attributes of the succeeding school

We are now a long way from the image of the government as the benevolent (if cold war inspired) developer and distributor of new curriculum packs to schools which act as the passive recipient. We have likewise moved from being interested in making things better, to change within the context of the individual school.

So there has come about a widespread agreement that the culture of the school is a significant factor in whether a school improves and succeeds, or not.

And meanwhile academics started to consider the attributes we would look for in an improving school. Fullan described them in the following way:

1. Leadership

Leaders of successful schools are dynamic, positive individuals who are responsive to every nuance of the daily life of the school. These leaders take the day-to-day reality of the school into account as they edge the school towards their vision.

2. High expectations

'High expectations' is a concept that appears on everyone's list at school, department, and individual teacher level as being important. Here it appears as part of the culture of the school with the additional component of a genuine feel for the pupils and students as individuals. The expectations are expressed through clear targets and goals, along with clear views of what is acceptable behaviour and what is not.

3. Communication

Communication is another concept that turns up at all levels of school organisation and is on everyone's list as being a key ingredient.

In order to make the first two factors work there needs to be massive amounts of communication within the school at all levels. This communication needs to go in all directions and across all divisions within the school. Our view is that no school ever has enough communication. If anyone ever says, "I just assumed x was handling this," it means you don't have enough communication.

The traditional image of the head teacher at the top of an organisational pyramid communicating with immediate deputies who pass the messages on, may be occasionally appropriate but for most of the time there is much more happening than this in the improving school. Likewise the tradition of the head only addressing the staff through the

staff meeting and heads of department meeting is also seen as dated. The new image is of a head teacher coming to individual departmental meetings, meeting with newly qualified teachers, as often as discussing matters with senior managers and handling general meetings.

4. Planning and implementation

School improvement does not happen by chance. It happens because, in part there is a culture of planning and implementation at all levels. The importance of clear planning and implementation policies cannot be over emphasised - but such policies must not lead to so many meetings and planning groups that they get in the way of the actual improvements.

These policies therefore define the underlying culture of the improving school. If your school does not feel like this it is probably not improving. However, although this point is worth exploring there is still a problem.

The awareness of what the culture of the improving school is like is a very helpful concept. But it does not tell us how to get a non-improving school into that situation. It tells you nothing about implementation.

It is the managers of a school who contribute towards the school culture. The ones who get it right seem to do so almost intuitively. It has been up to researchers to tease out from their behaviour exactly how they manage to do it.

Occasionally through this research the factors outlined above have been expanded. There has been:

- An emphasis on the involvement of teachers in all levels of activity including developing the school policies and in planning the curriculum.
- The role of the head teacher, deputy head, or other person of influence in the school as visionary leader has been expanded and given even greater importance.
- An emphasis has been placed on such issues as the structure of the school at all levels. This point reminds us that the school is an organised body in which the pupils and teachers can work, knowing where they are, where they are going and why they are going there. It has led to the regular agreement that the improving school is a work centred place.
- Excellent record keeping at all levels.

- A much wider involvement for parents including the move towards open door policies and parental involvement in both lessons and homework.

Many of the factors which have evolved from this line of research, when written in black and white, appear utterly obvious. The fact is, however, that many researchers and inspectors would comment that being obvious does not make things happen. Not all schools are rated excellent yet. Furthermore, many would comment that what school leaders imagine is the case and what actually is the case are often different matters.

Stenhouse, one of the greatest writers on educational reform that the West has ever known, wrote that:

It is teachers who will change the world.

It is our belief that Stenhouse was thinking of the way in which teachers can transform the life of pupils and students if they can deliver the right sort of education. It is our belief also that it is quite possible to deliver the right sort of education in the UK today and to put school improvement into practice. All the resources are available. It is simply a matter of method.

As Professor Day of Nottingham University pointed out at the Stenhouse Memorial Lecture in 1996, "We as teachers are in the business of improvement or detriment of students."

It is the role of *School Improvement Reports* to report the methods which are now being proven to work in schools and which can deliver the promised improvements without additional resources.

Our role is to review research data and to raise the question of how can we know that one method of running a school is better than any other?

The objection given by many teachers to our work is that everything depends on the pupils and the teachers. Such an argument is very close to the view which we refute throughout all our reports. The view that, "You couldn't do that sort of thing with these pupils," or "That won't work in Leeds." (Or Aberdeen or Cornwall or London or Belfast or any other geographic location in the UK).

Our view is simple - the information is available to help schools improve. It is relevant to all schools in all locations.