

## **FINAL DRAFT**

### **Rethinking School Effectiveness and Improvement: a question of paradigms**

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#### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to progressive school change by developing a more systematic critique of School Effectiveness (SE) and School Improvement (SI) as paradigms. Diverse examples of paradigms and paradigm change in non-educational fields are used to create a model of paradigms for application to SE and SI, and to explore the implications of their hegemony, their rootedness in a neoliberal policy environment, and their limitations as theories and methodologies of school evaluation and change. The paper seeks to identify reasons for the inadequacy of orthodox School Improvement in helping schools face contemporary challenges, including schools serving populations burdened by poverty, and finally identifies some alternative approaches to educational change. The paper draws examples from an English context, but with international resonances.

#### **Introduction**

To a considerable degree, the past two decades can be viewed as a ‘dictatorship of no alternatives’ (Unger 2005) in which the hegemony of neoliberalism left most politicians and policy makers incapable of conceiving a different, more worthwhile and sustainable future.

The officially promoted models of school evaluation and change provide a fine example of this; they hinder a genuine rethinking of educational institutions and activity, and serve at a meta level to obstruct meaningful change in pedagogy, curriculum, structures and relationships. They operate within a policy environment where, paradoxically, an insistence on modernization and improvement disguises the lack of transformative rethinking, and the mantra of ‘mission, vision and values’ serves as aesthetic and spuriously ethical camouflage for the reorientation of education to primarily economic functions (Ball 2008). With honorable exceptions, the frantic productivity of effectiveness and improvement experts is marked by the absence of a critical debate about educational purpose. There are clear parallels to the periods of ‘normal science’ (Kuhn 1962) when busy activity proceeds without examining basic assumptions.

But if paradigms obstruct alternative perspectives and models, explicitly raising the *paradigm* question flags up the importance of examining tacit assumptions and thinking beyond the

frame. Thinking in paradigm terms can be liberating because it historicizes and denaturalizes hegemonic ideologies. The concept gives us a tool to grab hold of the inner logic of a dominant way of thinking and action, to see the links between knowledge and power, and to open up a space of possibility within an apparently closed system.

Raising the question of paradigms is not without precedent in the field of school development – see for example Foster (1986) and Grace (1995), or, for a rigorous epistemological discussion, Evers and Lakomski (1991); there are also scholars and educators working deliberately or unknowingly outwith the SE/SI paradigms. Nevertheless it is appropriate to speak of the hegemony of SE and SI, given the degree of official support, and the saturation of practice, which gives the impression that they are the ‘only show in town’, the only way of conceptualising school evaluation and change. The terminology itself has the ideological effect of making these paradigms seem self-evident, since it would clearly be absurd to argue that schools should be less effective, stagnate or deteriorate. However, we might also recall that ‘improvement’ has been used historically to justify land enclosures and population clearances; faced with words which allow no negative interpretation, we must always ask ‘for what purpose and to whose benefit?’

The following section examines paradigms in diverse fields in order to identify key features and develop a framework for analyzing SE/SI.

### **Paradigms and paradigm change**

#### *Natural sciences*

Kuhn’s (1962) adoption of *paradigm* to refer to a distinctive way of viewing and studying phenomena was groundbreaking. By extending its meaning from ‘exemplary achievement’ to ‘all the shared commitments of a scientific group’, he enables us to focus on the (often tacit) frames of reference which unite an academic community.

His concept incorporates ‘instrumental, theoretical, and metaphysical commitments’ and various ‘objects of group commitment’ such as ‘symbolic generalizations, models and exemplars’ (1970:297). Kuhn argues that paradigms involve a range of elements, which we might sum up as:

- entities, forces and laws - key concepts, relationships and causes
- models – whether seen as heuristic or ontological
- legitimate problems and acceptable solutions
- methods and instruments.

Kuhn initially used *paradigm* to refer to a period of relatively stable consensus in a field, distinguishing *paradigms* from *preparadigmatic* periods, but later conceded that even in less stable times competing schools necessarily have their own paradigms.

Kuhn's notion of *revolutions* breaks with the previous assumption of gradual progress in science. He shows how a fundamentally different world-view emerges when contradictions in the old model create too much strain. Problems are initially explained away as *anomalies*, until eventually the realization grows that the entire model is inadequate and that there can be no progress on details within the old worldview. Kuhn argues that social and subjective as well as epistemological factors are at play, in both 'revolutionary' and 'normal' periods of scientific development.

By analogy with political revolutions, Kuhn argues the fundamental incompatibility of different scientific paradigms:

When paradigms enter, as they must, into a debate about paradigm choice, their role is necessarily circular. Each group uses its own paradigm to argue in that paradigm's defence. (1970: 94)

This *incommensurability* (Kuhn's word) has generated intense epistemological debate, and the term makes it easy to question the rationality of the process and accuse him of 'ontological relativism' (Norris 1997:82-96). In places Kuhn's explanations open him up to this accusation, but in general his concept of 'scientific revolutions' is compatible with a *realist* epistemology/ontology (Bhaskar 1975): understandings may change, as the best approximation to ontological reality so far available, without endangering the constancy of the material world. Despite his argument that new paradigms may emerge *in advance of* adequate proofs, Kuhn maintains a fundamental commitment to scientific (experimental / observational / rational) procedures (Kuhn 1970:42).

Kuhn's essential contribution lies in understanding that science is not a process of pure autonomous reasoning; scientists inevitably work within the framework of a shared world-view or paradigm. But paradigms go all the way down; a change of paradigm reaches beyond laws and relationships into the very entities we regard as the building-blocks; it establishes parameters for what can be observed, studied and spoken about, the questions which can be asked and the nature of possible solutions. He shows how the intense productivity of periods of 'normal science' within an established paradigm may be at the cost of a narrowing of vision and loss of critical faculties.

Kuhn's is not the only model of paradigm change in science. Canguilhem (1988) points to perspectival changes of scale or timescale in biology. Lakatos builds his argument upon

dis/continuities in the heuristic procedures which distinguish 'research programmes' (Larvor 1998: 53; Hacking 1981).

### *Social sciences*

Contrary to Kuhn's suggestion that paradigmatic change may not be relevant to the social sciences, their early history was marked by a contest between the positivism of Comte and J S Mill and the interpretivism and hermeneutics of Droysen, Dilthey and Simmel. However, social science paradigms often exist simultaneously, rather than one being replaced by another. Differences remain unresolved and perhaps incapable of resolution, exacerbated by fundamental disagreements about social perspectives, ethical frameworks and political values.

Commonplace references were made to 'paradigm wars' in the social sciences around the 1980s, often understood simplistically as an opposition between quantitative and qualitative *methods*. However, a paradigm is always more than just a methodology:

Methodology and epistemology are linked. Ways of knowing are guided by assumptions concerning what we are about when we inquire and by assumptions concerning the nature of the phenomenon into which we inquire. ... (Schwandt 1990:262)

Additionally, social science paradigms can actually change our social reality, not simply the way we view it. SE / SI presents an excellent example: the academic paradigm underpins a set of hegemonic practices, both reinforced by political directives. Conversely, challenging the academic paradigm can connect with a wider political struggle.

### *Other examples: literature, psychiatry and economics*

The following examples will serve, among other things, to illustrate how paradigm change affects disciplinary frames and boundaries, as well as shifting perspectives and norms.

Raymond Williams was clearly engaged in paradigm change despite not using the term. By reinserting key literary figures within a socio-political history and social critics, the latter are no longer a mere 'background' to the literature. He rejects the notion that

... the Poet, the Artist, is by nature indifferent to the crude worldliness and materialism of politics and social affairs; he is devoted rather to the more substantial spheres of natural beauty and personal feeling. (1958:48)

The political activities of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Southey and Byron

were neither marginal nor incidental, but were essentially related to a large part of the experience from which the poetry itself was made. (ibid: 48-9)

This challenge goes beyond methodological shifts, raising ontological, epistemological, political and ethical questions about the nature and parameters of Literature, the relationship between texts and readers, writers' and critics' perspectives, and so on.

R.D.Laing's attempt to reform psychiatry has an even more obvious relevance to SE/SI, as it involved a complex of professional practices as well as an academic discipline. From an instinctive revulsion at the treatment of patients in mental institutions, Laing grasped the necessity of both transforming practice and developing a new theoretical paradigm: he proposed social phenomenology as an alternative epistemology to the old medical model for explaining and treating 'schizophrenia'.

Drawing on Goffman (1961), he questioned the basic entities of psychiatry, including the role of *patient* and the categorisation of their problems as mental *illness*. The traditional clinical stance pathologises the patient through decontextualising his/her actions, whilst normalising the behaviour of the psychiatrist; Laing's project (e.g. 1960) entailed searching for meaning in the words and actions of the 'patient', but also studying social situations and families rather than just individuals.

A clear parallel can be seen in SE's isolation of the school from the wider social and policy environment. As I will argue, opposing the SE/SI paradigms requires both a practical and a theoretical challenge.

Finally, it is worth mentioning a much longer-term struggle over the nature of economics. Milonakis and Fine (2009) chart the reduction from *political economy* to *economics*, a process through which the social and historical dimensions of political economy were eroded, leaving a new discipline which developed in isolation from a wider understanding of society. Economics is, they argue, obsessed with formalistic modeling, leaving questions about capitalism, its origins and crises outside the frame. The wider approach was preserved, of course, in the Marxist paradigm (Choonara 2010). As with SE/SI, narrow disciplinary boundaries can serve to obscure the key political forces at work and the instability of the social world.

### *Summary*

What is at stake in paradigms and paradigm change is not only the dimensions identified in Kuhn's analysis:

- entities, forces and laws - key concepts, relationships and causes
- models – whether seen as heuristic or ontological
- legitimate problems and acceptable solutions

- methods and instruments

but also, in social sciences and humanities as well as policy and its determination of everyday life,

- an understanding of *politics and power*
- issues of *ethical* stance or commitment.

These layers cannot be separated; the political and ethical interconnect with the ontological, epistemological and methodological.

By *political*, I mean primarily that a paradigm might privilege some perspectives and interests more than others, or overlook important differences of power. As Lukes (2005) argues, 'Power is at its most effective when least observable'. By *ethical*, I am referring both to the researcher's and the practitioner's responsibility for moral evaluation of practice, as opposed to technicist judgements about 'what works'. The parallels with SE/SI's downplaying of social and political context will become clear.

### **The paradigmatic features of School Effectiveness**

School Effectiveness denotes a statistical approach to evaluation (see Hopkins 2001: 57) based on inter-school comparisons and the identification of key input factors relating to relative 'effectiveness'. Though a disproportionate emphasis on numerical evaluation is in itself problematic (e.g. Nikolas Rose 1999), the contribution of quantitative approaches to the complexity of school evaluation cannot be condemned out of hand. It is important to examine more closely the specifics of the SE paradigm in order to make a sharper critique, drawing on Bhaskar's theory of *realism*.

Bhaskar (1975) explores the relationship between ontology and epistemology, and provides a more complex account of the relationship between (real) causes or forces and phenomena as we experience them. Actions are brought about by real forces, but not all forces are actualised, since in reality multiple and conflicting forces are at work. Moreover, since correlation between events does not necessarily indicate causality, researchers must identify and verify the real causal processes and their direction. This is particularly necessary in open systems such as history and meteorology (1975:119-123), but clearly also applies to fields of social practice including Education.

#### *Methodological reductionism*

Statistical attempts to uncover causal relationships can be flawed for various reasons, resulting in reductionist models:

- they may assume that numerical differences faithfully reflect underlying causes;

- they may assume that correlation amounts to causality, with a particular directionality;
- they risk taking the basic categories at face value
- there may be interacting causes which may magnify, negate or simply muddle one another.

Biologist Stephen Rose demonstrates the consequences of reductionist models in his refutation of genetic determinism:

The ultra-Darwinists' metaphysical concept of genes as hard, impenetrable and isolated units cannot be correct. Any individual gene can be expressed only against the background of the whole of the rest of the genome. Genes produce gene products which in turn influence other genes, switching them on and off, modulating their activity and function. (Rose, 1998: 215)

Similarly, Büeler applies an ecological perspective to schools:

In complex systems, causes always appear in bundles, and only the presence of a whole series of conditions guarantees success. Linear thinking is not good enough: we need to think of causal networks, in which multiple factors make each other operational. (Büeler 1998: 672)

Specifically, school effectiveness research involves the following errors:

- a) By privileging quantifiable outputs, it places overwhelming emphasis on exam results.
- b) It is unable to describe complex directionality, for example good behaviour is positioned as an input without recognizing that it can be the consequence of poor teaching, or even viewed as an output of schooling.
- c) Finally, despite the complex detail of mathematical calculations, their truth depends on the validity of the features being observed and quantified. Many 'key characteristics' of effective schools (e.g. 'a clear and continuing focus on teaching and learning') are semantically incapable of being assigned unambiguously to some schools and denied to others, as would be required for valid statistical modelling. One wonders how observers are trained to identify and score such a characteristic. Furthermore, such a 'focus' might involve either transmission or social constructivist pedagogies, factual or critical learning. And whereas weak leadership is undoubtedly a problem, the 'strong leadership' which SE claims to be a crucial factor in successful schools could mean anything from supportive or inspirational to dictatorial. This unhelpful vagueness of terminology is concealed beneath the 'certainty' conferred by mathematical precision, creating a false aura of scientific objectivity.

*Contextual reductionism: pushing the world aside*

No school is an island. School effectiveness research recognizes this only tangentially, in its attempt to separate out and calculate the relative weight of influence of home and school on attainment.

Family background, social class, any notion of context are typically regarded as ‘noise’, as ‘outside background factors’ which must be controlled for and then stripped away so that the researcher can concentrate on the important domain of school factors. (Angus 1993: 361)

This does no justice to the complexity of interaction between school and neighbourhood, let alone the wider society and culture. Case studies of successful schools serving poor or marginalised populations (e.g. Blair and Bourne 1998; Wrigley 2000; Wrigley, Thomson and Lingard eds. 2011) point to the importance of teachers listening to the community voice, and of a curriculum which is inclusive of the community experience. ‘Turning round’ a struggling inner-city school may involve precisely that: turning the staff round to connect and negotiate with the community and its circumstances, as opposed to building higher institutional walls.

*Historical reductionism: research in a vacuum*

SE research seems remarkably unaware of its own history and place in the world. It accounts for its origins in opposition to the Coleman report (1966) as if this were merely a methodological turn. The Coleman report, denigrated in SE literature, was ground-breaking for the USA in demonstrating links between racial injustice and poor school attainment. SE has developed, as a paradigm defiantly separate from sociology, to highlight inter-school differences in effectiveness, while deliberately avoiding engagement with the wider political and policy environment which produces poverty and inequality. As Reynolds eventually admitted, ‘We [i.e. SE researchers] were instrumental in creating a quite widespread, popular view that schools did not just make a difference, they made all the difference.’ (Reynolds 2010:5)

SE research took off in England as a consequence of the marketization of education in the 1980s, and the term ‘ineffective’ is applied to schools as autonomous units. Angus rightly condemns SE as:

An isolationist, apolitical approach to education in which it is assumed that educational problems can be fixed by technical means and inequality can be managed within the walls of schools and classrooms provided that teachers and pupils follow ‘correct’ effective school procedures. (Angus 1993: 343)

*Moral reductionism: schools without values*



These are not just a methodological problem, but are intimately linked with the moral reductionism whereby researchers can wash their hands of responsibility for the social impact of their work. Lauder et al. (1998) refer to an ‘abstracted empiricism’ which ignores ‘policy, cultural, political and historical questions’. The nature of the academic discourse accompanies a self-concept as ‘objective’ or ‘scientific’ researchers and thereby absolved from moral judgements. However, the politics of the apolitical emerges in Teddlie and Reynolds’ claim that such a stance brings greater benefit.

The ‘narrow agenda’ of pragmatists working in SER is more realistic at this point in time than the ‘redistributive policies’ of the critical theorists... Pragmatists, working within the SER paradigm, believe that efforts to alter the existing relationship between social class and student achievement by bringing about broad societal changes are naïve, perhaps quixotic. We prefer to work within the constraints of the current social order. (Teddlie and Reynolds, 2001: 70-1)

Stephen Ball (1998:73) has rightly spoken of a ‘Faustian deal-making between the academic and politicians’.

#### *Summarising the SE paradigm*

Earlier, summarising from Kuhnian and other models of paradigm change, I concluded that paradigms can only be fully understand if we consider:

- entities, forces and laws - key concepts, relationships and causes
- models – whether seen as heuristic or ontological
- legitimate problems and acceptable solutions
- methods and instruments
- politics, i.e. the approach to power, whether privileging certain interests, or overlooking differences of power
- ethics, i.e. the researcher or practitioner’s responsibility for a moral evaluation of practice, not simply ‘what works’.

In other words, we may need to examine the intersection and interaction of multiple layers of reality and analysis: ontological, epistemological, heuristic, methodological, conceptual, political, ethical. Paradigms go all the way down, but also all the way out into the complex power nexus of the wider world.

School Effectiveness is more than just a ‘convenient’ method for comparing schools and identifying the causes for that comparison. It is based on a circumscribed ontology, involving the quasi-autonomous, managed and marketised school as the primary unit of analysis, whose

inner nature is changed by the behaviours of staff and particularly the headteacher as ‘leader’. SE has an equally circumscribed political stance, overlooking wider forces which impact on schooling and the ways in which injustice is re/produced. The spuriously scientific methodology not only produces dubious and inoperable conclusions on how schools might improve, but serves to sweep away the traces of all the other assumptions, so that we take for granted the ontological assumptions and blinkered political stance.

### **Paradigmatic School Improvement**

#### *A lack of ‘vision’*

David Hopkins makes the following distinctions:

1. SE uses a quantitative methodology, SI a qualitative.
2. SE is concerned with the formal properties of schools, as static organisations, whereas SI studies the dynamics of organisational processes
3. SE focuses on outcomes which are accepted as a ‘good’ whereas SI is concerned to ‘treat educational outcomes as not “given” but problematic’. (Hopkins 2001:57)

The first two points seem a fair summary but the third is highly questionable. In a policy environment such as England, marked for two decades by a centralised determination and surveillance of curriculum and pedagogy, mainstream SI has not lived up to Hopkins’ claim. Indeed, Hopkins himself defined school improvement as ‘a distinct approach to educational change that enhances student outcomes as well as strengthening the school’s capacity for managing change’ (1998:1036), in a context where ‘outcomes’ are inevitably understood primarily as test and exam results. Despite national differences, this situation will be familiar to readers in a number of other education systems.

SI has been characterised by a lack of educational and social direction. Indeed, the measurable outcomes which SE requires methodologically, and which the system of governance and accountability needs politically, have usually been accepted at face value by those working within the Improvement paradigm as educational aims *per se*.

As I argued in an editorial in late 2001, during the build-up to war, the school improvers had signally failed to develop the ‘vision’ which was so much part of their discourse:

We have devoted such energy to developing a sophisticated knowledge of change management, planning, assessment, school cultures, leadership. Now, in this new century, the question is unavoidably – to what end, all this? Where is the vision? ... Much of the high-level government interest in school improvement has led to an intensification of teaching, accountability, league tables, ... a relentless drive for more though not always better – and silence on the question of educational purpose.

What really matters: new targets to meet? High maths grades perhaps? Or caring and creative learners, a future, a sense of justice, the welfare of the planet and its people? (Wrigley 2003: 7)

Despite their methodological differences, SE and SI can be regarded as ‘twinned paradigms’ since around the early 1990s, following the establishment and popularity of the ICSEI conferences. The key twinning agreement is the article by Reynolds (for SE), Hopkins and Stoll (for SI) (1993) *Linking School Effectiveness Knowledge and School Improvement Practice: Towards a Synergy*. These authors speak explicitly of paradigms and paradigmatic change, but primarily in methodological terms, to the neglect of ontological, epistemological and ethical dimensions. They are silent about the political context they are working in, a neglect which has made it all the more difficult for those working within these paradigms to swim against the tide of neoliberal and authoritarian school policies.

#### *Non-democratic participation*

SI has placed enormous emphasis, as a requirement for successful school change, on the participation of all teachers (and to an extent other staff, parents and students) in the change process. Fullan’s catchphrase ‘You can’t mandate what matters’ (adopted from McLaughlin 1990:12) appeared to signal a progressive and democratic turn in school management, popularizing it among many headteachers. The reality is very different where a high-surveillance low-trust system undermines and distorts any moves towards authentic participation within the school, resulting in what Andy Hargreaves (1994) has called ‘contrived collegiality’. As Gunter (2001:144) has argued, the role of school management has been to ‘empower’ teachers to want exactly what the government decides they should want. In such a manipulative environment, terms such as ‘transformative leadership’ (Burns 1978) are hollowed out. It is noteworthy that Barber, a leading figure in English SI, quickly abandoned the pretence of collegial participation when he took a key government position, justifying the high degree of centralised control exerted over pedagogy as well as curriculum by quoting Pascal: ‘To show the peasants how to pray, first you must get them on their knees.’ (Jones 2001:88) The extent of this duplicity about ‘collegiality’ is well evidenced in a recent book based on interviews with the key policy agents of the period (Bangs, MacBeath and Galton 2011).

Many of the key figures in School Improvement remained uncomfortable with this degree of top-down control, but failed to oppose it publicly. A recurrent trope was to voice some doubts in the opening chapter of a book but continue by counselling headteachers towards a participatory approach as if such problems did not exist. It was as if teachers should simply take on trust the wisdom of government policy decisions and commit themselves

wholeheartedly to furthering them; the result was indeed ‘contrived collegiality’. Thrupp and Willmott (2003) have fittingly described this compromised position in mainstream SE as ‘subtle apologism’.

### *Managing ‘culture’*

Whereas SE regards a list of quasi-autonomous behaviours (the *key characteristics*) as the driving forces, SI prefers a more holistic perspective, often speaking in terms of *school culture*. Much is to be said for this, as culture invites a less mechanistic understanding than lists of effectiveness characteristics, and already in their classic *Fifteen thousand hours*, Rutter et al. (1979: 177-9) had concluded that the ‘*combined* and *cumulative*’ effect was more important than any individual inputs. However the negative side of this holism is its vagueness and disconnectedness. The term *culture* is often used in ways which mean little more than a readiness to accept change.

‘Culture’ has been deployed in diverse and rich ways in educational research, including Willis’s (1977) analysis of working-class male adolescent cultures, McLaren (1987) on rituals and norms, Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) analysis of cultural difference and unequal exchange (cultural capital), and the ‘multiculturalism’ debate.

SI texts however have tended towards a manipulative usage, based on Deal and Peterson’s (1999) argument that the principal’s main role is to ‘manage culture’. Instead of seeking to learn from diverse professional views and experiences, headteachers working within a strongly supervised macro-system are expected to align staff views to fit with top-down mandates through a process of mock ‘empowerment’.

Despite briefly acknowledging an anthropological sense of culture as significant ‘customs, rituals, symbols, stories and language – the artefacts of culture’, Stoll (1999) then strips away the materiality in favour of a ‘deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organisation’. A list of ‘norms of improving schools’ expresses culture in terms of positive feelings among staff:

1. Shared goals – ‘we know where we’re going’
2. Responsibility for success – ‘we must succeed’
3. Collegiality – ‘we’re working on this together’.

The warm glow of this discourse covers over an uncritical cohesion, taking little account of the many contradictions in real situations, the possibility that some innovations are ill-conceived, and the professional responsibility to evaluate them critically and even resist some. It is ironic that this usage has been adopted from industrial / commercial management whilst taking no notice of more critical discussion in that field (e.g. Alvesson 2002).

### *Summarising paradigmatic SI*

Because I do not intend a blanket and inaccurate condemnation of other writers and practitioners who use the term ‘improvement’ more openly or progressively, I use this subheading deliberately rather as Thrupp (2005) speaks of ‘official School Improvement’, to indicate a set of texts with shared perspectives, conclusions, discourse, and often close professional connections between authors. The paradigm has won substantial approval from governmental agencies in England and elsewhere.

Despite a very different methodology, ‘official’ SI shares with SE the assumption that the key entity is the quasi-autonomous school, requiring management and ‘leadership’ to survive the competition. It exhibits a blinkered view both of the wider political environment and of teaching and learning; indeed, its experts are seemingly unaware of other shelves in the Education library labelled sociology and pedagogy. It is essentially a study of management processes, operating as if the aims of schooling are unproblematically concerned with maximising attainment. It has little to say about power, social justice, or citizenship, and is seemingly unaware of these shortcomings.

This is not of course merely an English phenomenon. Robert Starratt (2003) develops a strong critique even of innovative thinkers in the field in North America. To summarize his critique, Leithwood’s adoption of ‘transformative leadership’ is limited to management processes, without any suggestion of a transformative approach to education or learning; Elmore’s insistence on administrators being not simply ‘managers of organizational procedures’ but needing to focus on ‘instructional improvement’ and ‘learning organizations’ nonetheless fails to challenge the ‘standards-based curriculum and the testing process’.

Yet there is increasing recognition that this is a major obstacle to serious improvement. In the USA, Diane Ravitch, a scholar of impeccable neoliberal credentials and a longstanding advocate of high-stakes testing combined with a schools market involving parental choice and charter schools, has openly recanted. She now argues that the mania for testing has led to a narrow focus on ‘basic skills’ to the neglect of wider knowledge and understanding; that we need a broad but flexible curriculum with scope for teacher initiative, local schools as ‘anchors of their communities’, and teachers who ‘raise questions, provoke debates, explore controversies.’ (Ravitch 2010: 230seq.)

Further indications of a serious crisis within SE can be found in a recent book by Reynolds, still its senior representative in the UK. In particular he recognizes that ‘instructional effectiveness’ is more significant than school effectiveness, and complains of a loss of interest by Government (i.e. the outgoing New Labour government), which increasingly relied on ‘semi-Messianic ... leading Headteachers’ as a source of knowledge. (Reynolds 2011)

The senior figure in the School Improvement camp, David Hopkins (2008), also argues for a shift of attention towards teaching and learning, but conversely insists on the importance of 'systemic leadership'. Hopkins' position is paradoxical, since he fails to defend the role of local education authorities, the traditional providers of such systemic leadership. The assumption that a sufficient number of 'superheads' will have time to spare from running their own schools to stand proxy for education authorities seems highly questionable.

In summary, we see a shift away from the school as the key entity, along with a call for richer pedagogical approaches, yet little slackening of top-down government control (despite ministerial rhetoric about 'free schools' in the new Conservative-led coalition government). The SESI twin-paradigm may be falling apart, but more enlightened orientations for educational change (e.g. Starratt 2003; Wrigley, Thomson and Lingard 2012) remain minority voices.

### **School development and social justice**

Perhaps the most significant 'anomaly' for SESI is its manifest inadequacy in responding to poverty-linked underachievement. I am using the term 'anomaly' here to echo Kuhn's (1962) discussion of perceived irregularities in the solar system which were initially assimilated as refinements to the Ptolemaic model before the eventual acceptance that the new Copernican model offered a more coherent solution.

Poverty-related underachievement is embarrassing for SESI even within its own amoral functionalism, because of the findings from international data that the biggest difference between education system averages lies not in the proportion of high achievers but in the size of the 'tail' of low achievers - a chronic and acute problem in the UK. The issue is, needless to say, highly complex, and much of the blame lies with the failure of neoliberal politicians to significantly reduce child and family poverty. However, it is also clear that the widespread influence of SESI appears to have done little to reduce poverty-related underachievement.

Surprisingly little attention has been paid by mainstream SI to this issue until recently; indeed, some of the most significant contributions have come from those rooted in other traditions concerned with pedagogy or equality studies, and unconnected with the SE/SI paradigms. This work has characteristically been ignored even where SESI loyalists have conducted 'systematic' literature reviews (see for example Muijs et al. 2004). It illustrates a mechanism whereby paradigms sustain themselves by deliberate or unwitting closure to alternative research.

Working outwith SESI, Blair and Bourne (1998), investigating ten successful multi-ethnic schools serving mainly African Caribbean communities, superficially adopted the SE genre of lists of 'key characteristics', but the factors they identified were anti-racist actions and structures such as challenging overt and structural racism, including low expectations - quite distinct from the standard list of SE inputs. Other seminal books include Thomson (2002), Riddell (2003), Cotton (2003), as well as my own work; similarly, well-known American research on urban education (e.g. Nieto 1999; Noguera 2003), and the very existence of entire networks such as the *Essential Schools* and *Accelerated Schools* (see Finnan et al. 1996), are overlooked by the SESI camp.

A set of case studies of successful multiethnic schools (Wrigley 2000), providing part of the foundation for a more theoretical general analysis (Wrigley 2003), confirmed my belief that school development theory must have a broader focus than leadership and change processes. These case studies demonstrate the importance not only of building a culture of participation including shared leadership, but of developing knowledge and practice around pedagogy, curriculum, school ethos, and connecting with communities. Moreover there was a crucial emphasis on empowerment, as opposed to the official stress on top-down surveillance. Thus social-constructivist pedagogies were well developed, often by teachers working in teams, and national curriculum mandates were reinterpreted and redesigned within these schools, often against the grain, with a strong emphasis on citizenship, critical thinking and the creative arts.

This is particularly important in schools serving disadvantaged neighbourhoods, which present a challenge for orthodox SI with its acceptance of high-stakes accountability regimes and pedagogical standardisation. It takes little insight to hypothesise that:

- a centrally prescribed curriculum may need greater adaptation to engage working-class or minority pupils in meaningful learning;
- a better theorized pedagogical enquiry is needed to help underachieving pupils;
- a deeper sociological understanding is important where relationships (both internal and with parents) are potentially more problematic and require more effort and thought, where there is a greater socio-cultural distance, where the community is in any sense troubled, or if parents have had a bad experience of schooling.

Whilst arguing against the narrow attainment focus of the SE/SI paradigms, it is crucial to recognize that formal qualifications are important for working-class and minority pupils; indeed, if you have the 'wrong' postcode or skin colour, you need such qualifications more than anyone. The problem is that an overemphasis on test and exam results can become counterproductive:

- insufficient attention is paid to the recognition (identity, self-esteem) aspect of social justice (Fraser 1997) which underpins personal struggles to succeed in school and in later life
- an overwhelming emphasis on the exchange value of learning (marks, grades and minor rewards) can result in curriculum and pedagogy which lack enjoyment and engagement. (Cummins, 2003).

This is paralleled in the position promoted by Lingard and colleagues (2003), who seek to reorientate school leadership and change to academic and social learning.

### **Reinventing school change**

In addition to work referenced in the preceding section, it is helpful to recognize theoretical resources for reconstruction which already exist elsewhere, albeit virtually unknown in Anglophone countries. For example, two major German-language handbooks (Altrichter et al. 1998; Bohl et al. 2010) reflect the breadth of emphasis I have been arguing for, covering pedagogical change and social justice, and including many examples of radical school development. From Spain, Carbonell (2002) integrates new understandings of change processes and obstacles with an orientation to critical pedagogies, sustainability and democracy. The international collection edited by Wrigley, Thomson and Lingard (2012), including the editors' introductory and concluding chapters, further develops a theorization of school change oriented to global democratic citizenship and social justice. Some of the most interesting writing on school change in English builds on pedagogical thinking rather than institutional (e.g. Perkins 1992).

This is not a matter of disregarding the insights of mainstream SI about change processes internal to the school, though these require extension and deepening if we are serious about ethical purpose and also a greater willingness to challenge systemic frameworks.

Nevertheless, the framework presented earlier for understanding paradigms provides a critical tool for rethinking the theory and practice of school development. It might be helpful, for instance, to abandon an exaggerated emphasis on the internal dynamics of quasi-autonomous schools, and look towards education systems such as Finland where quality depends far more on highly qualified teachers, a support system (discreet monitoring and support of weaker schools) and a strong welfare state (Hargreaves 2007).

As Unger argues, the 'dictatorship of no alternative' cannot be overthrown without ideas – an essential conclusion also of our own book:

This project is impossible without philosophical thinking... Philosophy involves a grappling with meanings, the meanings of words and actions, the significance of the



cultural phenomena which we often simply take for granted, the meaning of life... Without it even the most meticulously planned changes in lesson plans and school timetables will turn out to be insignificant rearrangements of inherited modes of schooling. (Wrigley, Thomson and Lingard eds. 2011)

School development requires a more daring intellectual reach, including books half forgotten. If we are to understand the dynamics of schools and change in neighbourhoods blighted by poverty, we would do well to complement the study of institutional processes with an analysis of the 'symbolic interactions' (Blumer 1969) between young people and their teachers, including a frequent failure to give respect to and build upon the identities and interests of students and families (a question of cultural capital, see Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Goffman (1961) provides an even stronger model by applying symbolic interactionism to highly defined institutional contexts.

A richer sense of *culture* is needed if we are to rethink school improvement in a context of neo-liberal globalization, including an orientation to critical citizenship and the achievement of success in inner-city schools. This would require, for example:

- examining the cultural significance of alienated forms of learning, in which, like factory work, you are told what to write and then hand over your product not to an interested audience but to the teacher-as-examiner, for token payment in the form of a mark or grade
- examining the cultural messages of classrooms which are dominated by the teacher's voice, closed questions and rituals of transmission of superior wisdom
- understanding how tacit assumptions about 'ability' and 'intelligence' are worked out in classroom interactions
- discovering how tacit assumptions about single parents and 'dysfunctional' working-class families operate symbolically in classroom interactions (Wrigley 2003:36-7).

Finally, it is unproductive to examine education and school change in an apolitical way. The struggle to resist and overcome poverty, racism and other forms of oppression, and to establish a participatory democracy oriented to social justice and sustainability, require political engagement in social movements in the wider world, as well as socially engaged professionalism as educators within the school.

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