The "Powerful Learning" Framework

This is the first of three articles by **David Hopkins** and **Wayne Craig** that will appear in this and the next two issues of Professional Development Today. They explore the overall theme: "Literacy, Numeracy and Curiosity – Implementing Deep School Reform in Melbourne, Australia", and pose fundamental issues for school improvement, professional learning and student achievement in all educational contexts, including the UK.

In this first article they describe strategies for a "powerful learning" framework. It includes an unrelenting focus on the "instructional core" – curriculum innovation, professional development and student voice - and places what students actually do, and the sense they make of it, at the centre.

This series of three articles provide an exemplification of two of the key insights emerging from the last decade research on school and system reform (Hopkins 2013). The first is Sir Michael Barber's (2009) observation that it was the school effectiveness research in the 1980's that gave us increasingly well-defined portraits of the effective school that led in the 1990's to increasing knowledge of more reliable school improvement strategies. In the same way, we have in the last decade begun to learn more about the features of an effective educational system, but are only beginning to understand the dynamics of

improvement working simultaneously at the various system levels. The second insight also belongs to Michael Barber; it is from the McKinsey report *How the World's Best Performing School Systems Come Out on Top* (together with Mona Mourshed, McKinsey, 2007) that "the quality of an educational system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers." These two truisms provide the context for these papers that focus on the improvement of student achievement through the development of professional practice within a systemic context.

The purpose of these articles is to deepen the analysis of strategies for improvement at the school and local level by using the 'powerful learning' framework developed in the Northern Metropolitan Region (NMR) of Victoria, Australia as an example. In the first article, the context of school reform in Melbourne is described together with an outline of the school improvement strategy designed to deliver on both moral purpose and the student achievement goals of enhanced literacy, numeracy and curiosity. In the second article, we describe in detail the 'theories of action' and the subsequent 'Curiosity Booklet' which were derived from the 'instructional rounds' strategy that proved critical in deepening the culture of teaching and learning in the Region are described in some detail. Finally in the third article, the leadership strategies adopted to ensure that implementation occurs at a level sufficient to impact on student learning and achievement are presented. An analysis is then made of the necessary school level conditions required to enable this. The paper concludes with a model of system reform and the theories of action that support it.

So, we now return to the focus of this first article in which we explore the strategies for improvement at the school and local level, known as the "powerful learning" framework.

◼◼◻ School Reform in Melbourne's Northern Region

Melbourne is Australia's second largest city and has a population of just over 4 million. The Northern Metropolitan Region (NMR), which covers the city's northern suburbs, includes more than 200 government primary, secondary and special schools, 80,000 students

and 7.500 principals and teachers. It is culturally and socioeconomically diverse and is home to some very affluent communities as well as some of Australia's poorest urban communities.

The school system has three sectors – a government system that caters for around seventy per cent of students, a Catholic system that has around twenty per cent of all enrolments and a range of independent or private schools that are often faith-based and that account for the remaining students. The government school sector – the focus of this paper – is highly devolved with more than ninety per cent of all funding going directly to schools. Representatives of the school and the Education Department appoint principals and principals determine the staff composition of the school staff and appoint teachers.

The approach adopted in NMR in utilising the powerful learning framework as a strategy for successful school reform at the local level is described in some detail here, in the belief that it can provide a transferable model for other settings (Hopkins, Munro and Craig 2011).

Successful school systems around the world—those that have high levels of equity in student achievement and success—are characterised by moral purpose and clarity of goals that have direct implications; not just for schooling, but also for the way society develops. This is also the case in the NMR that continues to strive to become a world-class educational system. The moral purpose for school reform in the NMR is to:

Provide a high quality education for all students regardless of background. This is to ensure that the conditions are in place to enable every student in the region to reach their potential. This moral purpose is reflected in a small number of tangible, but ambitious objectives, for student learning and achievement that are being vigorously pursued. These goals are also in line with the reform areas [in the 'National Partnership Agreements' that were agreed] with the Federal Government.

The goal is for all students in [the region] to be literate, numerate and curious, with schools continuing to provide a broad-based 21st century curriculum. (DEECD 2011, p. 8)

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Through setting such a goal and establishing the process of school reform to achieve it, the ambition is that in a relatively short space of time students, their parents, carers, teachers and other stakeholders, will notice a real difference. For example, NMR defines the following goals for 2013 (Northern Metropolitan Region 2009, p 9).

■ A student finishing primary school will demonstrate individual performance at or above national standards in literacy and numeracy and a sharp curiosity for learning. Thus literate, numerate and curious became the rallying call for school improvement across the region.

■ A student finishing secondary school will have a clear well-defined pathway to further training and education.

■ Parents and carers will have a substantive and meaningful engagement with their child's school and teachers and a clear understanding of their child's progress against national standards.

■ Teachers will have world-class professional skills, be high regard in their school communities and have

continuing access to quality professional learning opportunities.

■ The community will have confidence that individual student performance meets national standards and that graduates of NMR schools are capable of making valuable contributions as citizens and employees.

If these are the goals, then the approach to school improvement adopted by the Northern Metropolitan Region is the means of achieving them. The model shown in Figure 1, identifies the crucial elements of an effective school, demonstrates their interdependence and provides a guide to strategic action. This is an action framework designed to help both those working directly in schools and those working at district or regional level, to more effectively manage the realignment of top-down and bottom-up change over time. This approach not only illustrates how a region such as NMR is balancing top-down and bottom-up change in practical ways, it also introduces a new concept, for Australia at least, of successful change by moving from the inside out rather than the outside in.

Figure 1 The powerful learning regional school improvement strategy framework (Reproduced from Northern Metropolitan Region 2009, p. 13)
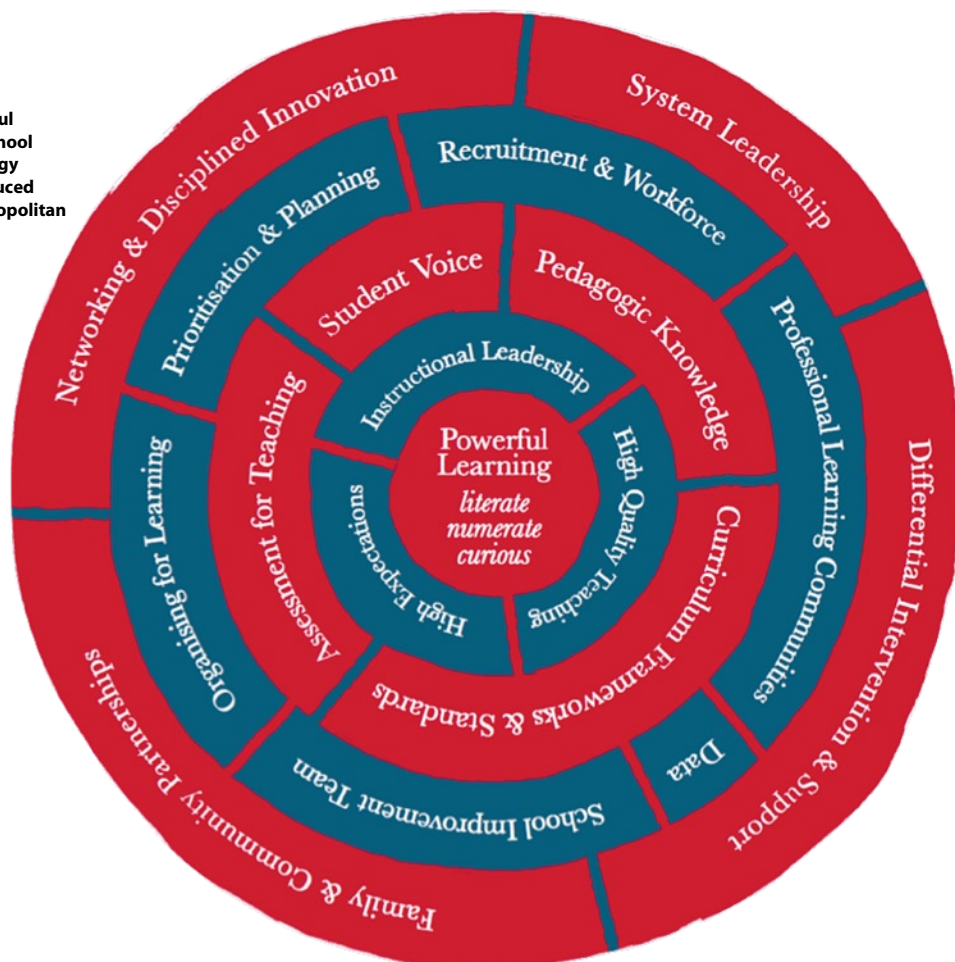
The main features of the approach are as follows.

1. In the centre is powerful learning, which represents the school's goal that every student will reach their potential, together with a definition of achievement that embraces standards of literacy, numeracy and learning capability (curiosity). Such a learning focus will not only raise standards, but also reduce the range of performance in a school, thus simultaneously 'raising the bar and narrowing the gap'.

2. Effective schools are not simply an amalgam of disparate elements. There are some essential features that need to be in place that lay the basis for greatness—these are the pre-conditions for effectiveness, upon which all else is built. Without these, a school will be unable to achieve or sustain excellence. These three features, represented in the second ring of the diagram, are:

- The importance of instructional leadership
- The quality of teaching
- A culture of orderliness and high expectations.

3. The next ring is comprised of those essential ingredients of effective classroom practice necessary for powerful learning:

- The teacher's repertoire of teaching and learning strategies, commonly known as pedagogical knowledge
- The organisation of curriculum in terms of frameworks and standards
- The way that learning is assessed in order to inform teaching
- The ways in which students are involved in their learning and the organisation of the school.

4. The organisational conditions supportive of high levels of teaching and learning are detailed as the key elements found in the next ring, these are:

- Collaborative planning that focuses on student outcomes

- Professional learning that is committed to improvement of classroom practice
- Regular use of data, enquiry and self-evaluation to improve teaching
- The recruitment of teaching staff and the deployment of the whole school workforce
- The identification of a school improvement team to provide the research and development capacity for the school
- The way in which the school is organised to most effectively promote learning.

5. The broader systemic context of the school is represented in the outer ring of the diagram by reference to four obligations and opportunities enjoyed by all schools in the Northern Metropolitan Region:

- The opportunity to network with other schools in order to share good practice and engage in disciplined innovation
- The way in which schools embrace and respond to the needs and opportunities provided in their locality from parents, carers and communities
- The new opportunities for principals to engage in broader forms of 'system leadership' where they take on a range of roles in supporting other principals and schools
- The opportunity to engage in more purposeful reflection on the effectiveness of the school's provision provided by the region's regular reviews of schools and the subsequent planning and differential intervention and support determined by the school's current performance.

A further perspective needs to be added that is critical to an understanding of the NMR approach and its general applicability. Most school reform assumes that change comes from the outside–in. The logic goes something like this:

A high quality policy or program is developed and then implemented, with the assumption that it will impact upon the school and be internalised through the school's planning

processes. In turn, it is assumed this will impact on classroom practices and will therefore positively affect the learning and achievement of students. (DEECD 2011, p. 11)

It is as if the drive comes from the outer circle of the diagram and permeates the various layers, hopefully reaching the powerful learning of students in the centre.

However, in our experience, those schools that have made the jump from 'good to great', the linear logic of policy implementation has been inverted. Instead of doing outside–in better, or more efficiently, they start from the centre of the circle and move outwards; these schools begin at the other end of the sequence, with student learning. It is as if they ask, 'What changes in student learning and performance do we wish to see this year?' Having decided these, they then discuss what teaching strategies will be most effective at bringing them about, and reflect on what modifications are required to the organisation of the school, including the professional learning of its staff, to support these developments. Finally, they embed within their school improvement plans, those policy initiatives that provide the best fit with the school's vision, values and goals for enhancing student achievement. It is these schools that appear to be the most effective at interpreting the national, state and regional reform agenda. The underlying purpose of the powerful learning framework described above is to generate this degree of confidence and agency in schools. In so doing, it exposes the paucity of simple autonomy as a recipe for systemic educational reform. It is this framework that provides the scaffolding for 'inside-out' working.

After several years, it was clear that significant progress had been made in terms of literacy and numeracy. Taken as a whole, all of the performance measures available - National Program for Assessment – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data, Year 12 Achievement data, Year 12 or Equivalent Completion data, student, teacher and parent opinion data – were

tracking in a strongly positive direction. Literacy and numeracy data for years 3, 5, 7 and 9 showed that the region had in broad terms gone from being one of the poorest performing to one of the better performing of the state's nine regions, with all data sets either above or very close to state means. Year 12 performance data had grown significantly particularly in terms of a dramatic reduction in the number of very poorly performing schools. Growth in Year 12 Attainment by Age 19 showed the greatest increase of any of the regions in the period 2001 to 2010. Student, teacher and parent opinion data, gathered annually also showed on-going and significant growth (DEECD 2011).

■■■ The importance of the Instructional Core

Although commendable, the progress on student gains in literacy and numeracy made in NMR has parallels with a number of other regions and districts (Hopkins 2013). Short-term increases on these measures are often achieved through the use of top down and instrumental strategies. The real challenge is to sustain these improvements into the medium and long term and *at the same time* enhance the learning skills, the spirit of enquiry or curiosity of our students. This is where the focus on implementation and inside-out working becomes so important. This is where our work is perhaps more unique, so we need to set the scene in a little more detail.

For us, the elephant in the room of school and system improvement, and it has been resident for sometime, is the lack of a professional practice that provides a language and a set of behaviours or processes to connect teaching to learning. There are two key problems here: the first the individualised and atomised nature of teaching as a profession; the second that teaching is a profession without a practice. These two tendencies intertwine in intricate and resilient ways.

We have been helped to understand the nature of this complexity through conversations with Richard Elmore, and more recently through reading the book he co-authored with his colleagues entitled *Instructional rounds in education* (City et al. 2009). In that book they contrast the individualism that too often characterises teaching,

where the person and the practice are intertwined, with professionals who are those that share a common practice and open it up to public scrutiny. Professionals believe that the only way to improve one's practice is to allow yourself to think that your practice is *not* who you are. It is, instead, a way of expressing your current understanding of your work, your knowledge about your work, and your beliefs about what is important about the work. All these things can change—*should* change if you are a professional—as your knowledge, skill, expertise and understanding of your work increases. The real insight here is that you can maintain all the values and commitments that make you a person and still give yourself permission to change your practice. Your practice is an instrument for expressing who you are as a professional; it is not who you are. How practice is defined is therefore critical and Elmore and his colleagues (City et al. 2009, p. 3) mean something quite specific:

> *We mean a set of protocols and processes for observing, analyzing, discussing and understanding instruction that can be used to improve student learning at scale. The practice works because it creates a common discipline and focus among practitioners with a common purpose and set of problems.*

It is the lack of such a practice that has inhibited recent reform efforts from unleashing the potential of our students. We need to reach down into the classroom and deepen reform efforts by moving beyond superficial curriculum change to a more profound understanding of how teacher behaviour connects to learning. In particular, it requires a direct and unrelenting focus on what many are now calling the 'instructional core'.

In its simplest terms 'the instructional core is composed of the teacher and the student in the presence of content' (City et al. 2009). Although there are a number of principles associated with the definition of the instructional core, two features in particular require emphasising from the outset.

The first feature is that one element of the instructional core cannot be changed without impacting directly on the other two. Yet most change efforts focus on

only one—curriculum innovation, or professional development or student voice. The three need to be regarded as a whole if authentic change in student achievement is to occur. It is the relationship between the teacher, the student and the content—not the qualities of any one of them by themselves—that determines the nature of instructional practice. Each corner of the instructional triangle has its own particular role and resources to bring to the instructional process.

The second feature is more subtle but even more important. It is an understanding that the 'instructional task' is at the centre of the instructional core. The instructional task is the actual work that students are asked to do in the presence of instruction. It is not what teachers think they have asked students to do, nor what the prescribed curriculum says they should be doing, but what students are actually doing and the sense they make of it, that is fundamental (City et al. 2009). This is why in *Models of learning: tools for leaching* (Joyce, Calhoun & Hopkins 2009, p. 7) we claimed that:

> *Learning experiences are composed of content, process and social climate. As teachers we create for and with our*

children opportunities to explore and build important areas of knowledge, develop powerful tools for learning, and live in humanizing social conditions.

Unless we make the instructional task the focus of our enquiry, then we can have no confidence that learning will be enhanced and consequently, the outcomes of educational reform will remain capricious. We must continuously remind ourselves that it is the tasks that students undertake that predict their performance (Doyle, 1987).

The concept of the instructional core provides the basic framework for how to intervene in the teaching process so as to improve the quality and level of student learning. The following five principles guide the work (adapted from City et al. 2009).

1. Increases in student learning occur only as a consequence of improvements in the level of content, teachers' knowledge and skill and student engagement.
2. If you change any single element of the instructional core, you have to change the other two to affect

student learning.

3. The tasks students do predict their performance; so the real accountability lies in the tasks the students perform.

4. We learn to do the work by doing the work: people have to engage in sustained description and analysis of instructional practice before they can acquire either the expertise or the authority to judge it.

5. In developing a practice around the instructional core, description comes before analysis, analysis before prediction and prediction before evaluation.

In the second article in this series the focus will turn to a detailed description of the 'theories of action' derived from the 'instructional rounds' strategy that proved critical in deepening the culture of teaching and learning in the Region. This second article will appear in the next issue of PDT.

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