

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

School improvement (SI) is a developmental approach to understanding how and why schools change or remain static over time. Whereas school effectiveness research (SER) is cross-sectional, output-focused and empirical, SI is longitudinal, process-focused and evangelical. It holds that all schools *need* to be improved and that all schools *can* be improved, though they operate under different sets of circumstance, produce different outcomes and need to be judged 'effective' using different metrics. SI is therefore qualitative and usually small-scale in approach, and unlike SER, which is disinterested in the propriety of aims, it seeks to interpret and evaluate the appropriateness of policy and the effect of practice at different systemic levels. It seeks insights rather than correlations; it is attitudinal and tactile.

SI followed in the wake of SER (1979) so its provenance can be traced to the 1980s, though there was earlier work on developing curriculum resources to improve student outcomes that could be included in the genre (Hopkins & Lagerweij, 1996). The early emphasis was on improvement of *output* resulting from government fiat. In later years this shifted to process and *outcome*-focused research, and became naturalistic, grounded and very practitioner-based, which sometimes manifested itself in obscurity and a querulous tendency that bordered on the self-destructive (Reynolds, 2007).

Typically, SI research produces case studies, strategies and resources for improvement, but recounting success is not the same as creating it (Fullan, 1991). Consequently, in the 1990s, 'leadership of change' became the nostrum, albeit in the context of a growing managerialism. Educational reform in most developed countries had been accompanied by a shift to local self-management of schools, which

established new responsibilities for teachers and heads and a growing need in schools for external support. SI engaged with this 'change movement' because it had the potential to build in schools the capacity for organisational learning and self-generated improvement. As a result, improvement research continues to rest on a number of assumptions: that although the school is the 'load' to be moved, better classroom teaching is the 'lever' to be pulled; that 'systems thinking' is possible and desirable; that internal conditions are critical to success; that there are many perspectives to whole school improvement; and that external improvement techniques can be imported into schools from outside education (Kelly, 2004).

If SER is about *measuring* difference, then SI is about *generating* it. SER sees itself as 'doing the science' that allows SI to endure. In that sense, it lights the way for SI, though the latter must additionally be guided by influences external to the school (and to SER): in society, in communities and among policy-makers. Today, the emphasis within SI is on policy. It is more political and less managerial than previously, but its praxis still produces extremes of usefulness and benefit. At worst, it is a farrago of anecdote celebrating the folklore of charisma and the practical *nous* of teachers. In its solipsism, it represents a rush to action by frightened policy-makers (and advisors) whose attempts at theorising from findings, when made at all, tend to be tenuous and imprecise. In fairness, SER and SI differ subtly but intrinsically in respect of their relationship with theory. The former is essentially experimentalist and *testing* of theory; the latter seeks to coalesce what is known and is *developing* of theory.

At its best, SI is an insightful and practical fugue. It has contributed to - nay, it has *shaped* - our understanding of change as it relates to the educative process and its best exponents are among the foremost academics working in the field of education. It is

not empirical, but why should it be? It makes no attempt at proving the causality that other approaches seek but invariably fail to find. It rejects the illusion that schools are rational entities whose inmates operate with complete knowledge and certainty, but embraces schools as chaotic places and bravely attempts to capture the subtleties therein. The challenge for SI going forward is for it to develop a *rapprochement* with SER: to encourage more quantitative work in the one and greater practical empathy in the other (Reynolds, & Stoll, 1996), and to engage fully both approaches in schools serving disengaged constituencies.

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