


CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR CLASSROOM IMPROVEMENT

*A HANDBOOK OF STAFF
DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES*

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Publisher’s Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent

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Acknowledgements

Over the past seven years we have been privileged to work closely with the sixty or so schools participating in the 'Improving the Quality of Education for All' (IQEA) school improvement project. Although our purpose has been to assist them in managing the process of change, we have learned far more from them than we could ever have contributed to their progress. Whatever virtue our work has, it is only the result of the insight, commitment, tolerance and good humour of our friends in the IQEA network. Thank you.

We are also grateful to our colleagues at the University of Nottingham, the University of Cambridge School of Education and the University of Manchester for their continuing support of the IQEA Project. In particular we are grateful to Carol Mee and Avril Rathbone for the secretarial help provided during the preparation of this book. We acknowledge too David Fulton and John Owens of David Fulton Publishers, who despite our cavalier attitude towards publishers' deadlines, believe sufficiently in our work that they continue to share it with a wider audience.

In preparing this school improvement handbook, we have inevitably drawn on our other published work which we acknowledge here and in the reference list. In particular: more detailed descriptions of the IQEA process are found in *School Improvement in an Era of Change* (Hopkins *et al.* 1994) and *Improving the Quality of Education for All* (Hopkins *et al.* 1996); and a more theoretical treatment of the 'classroom conditions' is found in the journal *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice* (Hopkins *et al.* 1998). This book follows closely the pattern established by its companion volume *Creating the Conditions for School Improvement* (Ainscow *et al.* 1994).

Improving the Quality of Education for All

Introduction

During the past seven years or so we have been working closely with schools in East Anglia, North London, Yorkshire, Humberside, the East Midlands, as well as Iceland, Puerto Rico and South Africa on a school improvement and development project known as *Improving the Quality of Education for All* (IQEA). The overall aim of the project is to strengthen the schools' ability to provide quality education for all its pupils by building upon existing good practice. In so doing, we are also producing and evaluating a model of school development, and using the opportunity of collaboration with schools in the IQEA network to conduct a long-term investigation into the processes of school change and student achievement.

As we work with schools within the framework of a national reform agenda we are committed to an approach to educational change that focuses on student achievement *and* the school's ability to cope with change. We refer to this particular approach as *school improvement*. We regard school improvement as a distinct approach to educational change that enhances student outcomes *as well as* strengthening the school's capacity for managing improvement initiatives. In this sense school improvement is about raising student achievement through focusing on the *teaching/learning* process and those conditions which support it.

The IQEA school improvement project works from an assumption that schools are most likely to strengthen their ability to provide enhanced outcomes for all pupils when they adopt ways of working that are consistent with both their own aspirations as a school community and the current reform agenda. Indeed, the schools we are working with are using the impetus of external reform for internal purposes as they navigate the systemic changes of recent years.

At the outset of IQEA we attempted to outline our own vision of school improvement by articulating a set of principles that provided us with a philosophical and practical starting point. These principles were offered to schools as the basis for collaboration in the IQEA Project. In short, we were inviting the schools to identify and to work on their own projects and priorities, but to do so in a way which embodied a set of 'core' values about

Improving the Quality of Education for All – principles

school improvement. These principles represent the expectations we have of the way project schools pursue school improvement. They serve as an *aide-mémoire* to the schools and to ourselves.

The five principles of IQEA are:

- School improvement is a process that focuses on enhancing the quality of students' learning.
- The vision of the school should be one which embraces *all* members of the school community as both learners and contributors.
- The school will see in external pressures for change important opportunities to secure its internal priorities.
- The school will seek to develop structures and create conditions which encourage collaboration and lead to the empowerment of individuals and groups.
- The school will seek to promote the view that enquiry and the monitoring and evaluation quality is a responsibility which all members of staff share.

Although we feel that the operation of these principles can create synergy around change (i.e. together they are greater than the sum of their parts), they characterise an overall approach rather than prescribe a course of action. The intention is that they should inform the thinking and actions of teachers during school improvement efforts and provide a touchstone for the strategies they devise and the behaviours they adopt.

The principles emphasise what we know from experience, as well as from the research on student achievement and school effectiveness, that the greatest impact on student progress is achieved by those innovations or adaptations of practice that intervene in, or modify, the learning process. Changes in curriculum, teaching methods, grouping practices and assessment procedures have the greatest potential impact on the performance of students, and so provide a key focus for school improvement efforts.

Unfortunately the implementation of those changes that positively affect the learning of students is very difficult to achieve. This is because, as Michael Fullan (1991) has pointed out, educational changes that directly impact on the learning of students usually involve teachers in not only adopting new or additional teaching materials, but also in:

- acquiring new *knowledge*
- adopting new *behaviours* (e.g. new teaching styles)
- and, sometimes in modifying their *beliefs or values*.

The implementation 'dip'

It is exactly because change is a process whereby individuals need to 'alter their ways of thinking and doing' that most changes fail to progress beyond early implementation. It is this phenomenon that Fullan (1991) has graphically referred to as 'the implementation dip'. This incorporates that constellation of factors which creates the sense of anxiety and those feelings of incompetence so often associated with relearning and meaningful change. This is the phase of dissonance, of 'internal turbulence', that is as predictable as it is uncomfortable. Many research studies have found that without a period of destabilisation, successful, long-lasting change is unlikely to occur. The implications for school improvement is that conditions need to be created

Conditions for classroom improvement

within the school that ensure that individuals are supported through this inevitable but difficult and challenging process.

This is why we have found that within the IQEA Project, *school improvement works best when a clear and practical focus for development is linked to simultaneous work on the internal conditions within the school*. Conditions are the internal features of the school, the 'arrangements' that enable it to get work done. Without an equal focus on conditions, even development priorities that directly affect classroom practice quickly become marginalised. Examples of the conditions that support school improvement are: collaborative planning, staff development, enquiry and reflection, and the involvement of students. Experience of the IQEA Project suggests that work on these conditions results in the creation of opportunities for teachers to feel more powerful and confident about change.

The IQEA approach to school improvement is based on our experience that effective change strategies focus not only on the implementation of school-selected policies, or chosen initiatives, but also on creating the conditions within schools that can sustain the teaching/learning process. A previous book in this series, *Creating the Conditions for School Improvement*, focused primarily upon creating the school-level conditions for improvement (Ainscow *et al.* 1994).

As our work has progressed, we have found it necessary to establish certain conditions within the classroom alongside those at the level of the school. We have recently been elaborating such a set of classroom conditions designed to assist teachers in facilitating the learning of all students. In this book we present our initial conceptualisation of those classroom conditions which we have found necessary for sustainable school improvement.

Who is the book for?

In writing this book we have had in mind the teacher, or indeed groups of teachers, interested in classroom-level change and development. In some cases such individuals may have assumed responsibility for development work in the school. It may be a head, or deputy, the appraisal or curriculum coordinator, the person in charge of staff development, or of drawing up the school's development plan. It may even be a head of department or faculty who has a clear view of effective teaching and wishes to extend this view by working with colleagues. In short, this book is for anyone in a school who is taking responsibility for some form of development activity.

What does the book do?

This book is not about what changes should be introduced into a school but instead it focuses upon creating the conditions for *supporting* those changes which lead to improvement in the classroom and the school. To be effective at managing change, schools and teachers need to modify the internal conditions of the classroom *at the same time* as introducing changes in teaching or the curriculum. The book therefore provides ideas and materials to help colleagues in school to create such conditions in classrooms and offers a strategic approach to staff development.

How should the book be used?

This book is not a step-by-step guide to classroom improvement. In our experience such ‘quick-fix’ approaches, although superficially attractive, rarely work in practice. Although schools can use similar broad approaches and strategies to develop, there is no one way that is right for every school. Consequently, the book provides different starting points and strategies for teachers in varying contexts and situations. These staff development resources are intended to be used within the context of the school’s own aspirations. A key task of those using the suggestions and materials provided here will be to decide which of them are most suitable and for what purpose.

How is the book organised?

As part of our work with schools we have identified six key conditions necessary for effective classroom development. The bulk of the book is taken up with describing in individual chapters what these conditions are, and in presenting staff development exercises on how they can be encouraged. Prior to this in-depth look at the classroom conditions, we present a brief account of our current school improvement work and a rationale for the ‘conditions’ approach. At the end of the book we make some suggestions as to how a school can develop its own school and classroom improvement strategy.

Some people may find it helpful to read the book cover to cover as an introduction to classroom improvement. Others, having a clear idea of where they are going, may wish just to plunder it for staff development activities. Both are fine by us – we hope that the book is organised sufficiently clearly to allow for both approaches, as well as those in between.

Where do the ideas come from?

This book is based on our school improvement work which we have been pursuing in various guises and in different combinations of collaboration since the late 1980s. Although we are, for some of our life, university teachers, we also work intensively with schools as facilitators of the change process; there are now almost a hundred schools in our network. As a consequence the book is grounded in practice, but also tested by reference to the available research evidence. Those who are interested in pursuing these ideas further should consult our other texts on this subject, e.g. *School Improvement in an Era of Change* (Hopkins *et al.* 1994) and *Improving the Quality of Education for All* (Hopkins *et al.* 1996), which both give a more theoretical perspective, but also provide many practitioner accounts of school-based work on the improvement conditions.

It is appropriate therefore that this second practical handbook is about ‘creating the conditions for classroom improvement’. Despite the abundance of policy initiatives and change efforts, too little of it positively affects classroom practice. We hope that this book will help in some way to get those useful and helpful changes behind the classroom door.

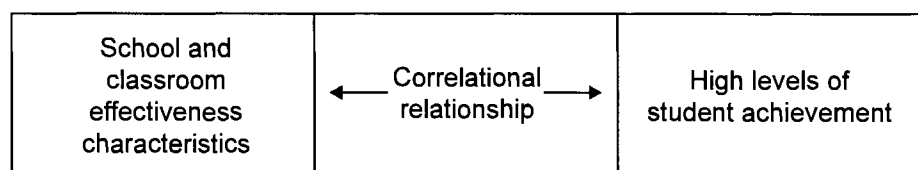
Creating the conditions for classroom improvement

Introduction

We have already noted that one of the early findings from the IQEA Project was that *school improvement works best when a clear and practical focus for development is linked simultaneously to work on the internal conditions of the school*. This led us to develop and test a strategy for school improvement based on such a twin focus. As we have also noted, the conditions identified during the early phases of the project were related to school-level conditions, or the school's management arrangements, although of course many of the schools' priorities were classroom-based (Hopkins *et al.* 1994). But, in line with contemporary school effects research, we too were finding that it is necessary to modify the conditions within the classroom, as well as those at the level of the school, if school improvement strategies are to fully impact on student achievement (Creemers 1994, Joyce and Showers 1995, Joyce *et al.* 1997). We have therefore been elaborating a set of classroom conditions that enable teachers to facilitate the learning of all students. In this chapter we outline our 'conditions' approach to school improvement and then present an initial conceptualisation of the classroom conditions necessary for a sustainable school improvement strategy.

Rationale

The research on both school and teacher effects draws on similar epistemological models to generate knowledge. Put simply, they follow a process-product research design. High levels of student achievement are identified and 'backward mapped' to identify those school and teacher characteristics that correlate with high levels of student outcome. This research effort has over the past twenty years yielded impressive results and given us rich and detailed descriptions of the characteristics of effective schools and classrooms.



Conditions

For those of us committed to improving as well as understanding the effectiveness of schools and classrooms, the research on school and classroom effects has one major weakness. Because the relationship between these characteristics and student outcomes is one of association, it tells us little about how one affects the other.

It is the hiatus between the school/teacher characteristics on the one hand, and enhanced levels of student achievement on the other, that provides the focus for our work. We work from an assumption that there are a set of intervening variables operating at the school and classroom level that mediate between the characteristics of effectiveness on the one hand and enhanced levels of student achievement on the other. It is this emphasis on the *enabling conditions* at both the classroom and school levels that distinguishes our work from colleagues who operate within the school effectiveness tradition, and indeed from many of those who intervene in schools and classrooms for the purposes of improvement.

It is the enabling conditions that allow the 'process' to affect the 'product'. A simple example illustrates the point. It is now well established that co-operative group instruction has a positive impact on student achievement (e.g. Slavin 1993, Joyce *et al.* 1987, Johnson and Johnson 1989). Knowing that, however, is not enough. We also need to know what conditions have to be in place inside the school to allow the teaching approach to impact upon student achievement. These conditions will obviously vary from school to school, but it is fair to suggest that the full impact of this teaching strategy will not be achieved without a degree of school- and classroom-based *staff development*, some *enquiry and reflection* on progress made, and the *involvement of students* in the teaching and learning process. In order for this teaching strategy to have a whole-school impact there would also be a need for *leadership* at all levels in order to initiate and sustain the momentum, some *collaborative planning* to ensure direction, and *coordination* of the activity throughout the school. Our previous work has enabled us to produce a formulation at the school level that gives us some confidence to proceed (Hopkins *et al.* 1994).

Innovations in teaching and learning designed to enhance student achievement, e.g. cooperative group work	Enabling conditions ←or capacity building→ in the school	High levels of student achievement
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Although this focus on 'enabling conditions' or 'enhancing the school's capacity' for innovation and change draws on the implementation research (see, for example, Fullan 1991), it is an idea that is still not well understood. Although the words that we use to describe the enabling conditions contain similarities to those found on the lists of school effectiveness characteristics, there are qualitative differences between them. The 'gap' between characteristics and outcome that we encounter frequently in our ongoing research and development work with schools requires a much more radical and

Capacity

sophisticated understanding of school change than just simply translating the school-level characteristics into 'doing words'. To take our (Hopkins *et al.* 1994:3) definition of school improvement as 'a distinct approach to educational change that enhances student achievement as well as strengthening the school's capacity for managing change seriously' requires a fundamental rethinking of strategies for innovation and change based on a transcendence and reintegration of our current frameworks of knowledge and action (West and Hopkins 1996, Hopkins 1996).

Besides the focus on capacity building, while at the same time working on strategies that enhance student achievement, there is another characteristic to the enabling conditions that is worth mentioning here. If the concern is to help teachers modify their behaviour in order to enhance the learning of their students then it is necessary to use the language and frames of reference that reflects the experience of teachers. Although this may appear an obvious point, Sally Brown and her colleagues (1995:6) argue on the basis of their recent research that:

the ways in which teachers conceptualise pupils' progress, and the kind of classroom support that is required to promote that progress, are much more complex and rich than the conceptions of progress and support implicit [in the] school effectiveness research.

The disjuncture between the language of research and the language of teachers is, in our experience, a major barrier to innovation and development in schools. Unless a school improvement strategy reflects the implicit theories of practitioners, then it will in our experience be doomed to failure. This is not to argue however that the teacher's view is necessarily correct, or complete; if it were then there would be little need for school improvement. But it is to argue that change efforts need to begin with the experience of teachers and to work at the level of the classroom to sustain change at the level of the organisation.

Michael Fullan (1995) makes a similar point in his recent critique of 'The school as a learning organisation':

If schools as learning organisations are not to be a distant dream, he argues, teachers need to expand their notions of teaching within the context of capacity building and action enquiry. Changes in teaching practice only occur when there is clarity and coherence in the minds of teachers.

In terms of the traditional language of change, for strategies that are concerned with student achievement, this clarity needs to be at the receiving end rather than at the delivery end. In other words, researchers and policy-makers may have very clear strategies for change and improvement, but unless these connect with the understanding of realities of teachers this increasing clarity at the top will only increase incoherence at the bottom.

It is ideas such as these that have informed our approach to school improvement. The need to build capacity whilst enhancing the teaching/learning process, and the importance of working from the language, theories and experience of teachers are very much part of our ways of working. This is the rationale for our research into developing the classroom conditions for school improvement.

Original conceptualisation

Our framework for school improvement is based on our experience that effective change strategies focus not only on the implementation of centralised policies or chosen initiatives, but also on creating the conditions within schools that can sustain the teaching/learning process. Unless this is done, the impact of any development will only be tangential to the central purpose of educational change – the enhanced achievement of students. As we have already indicated, from our work on the IQEA Project, we have identified a series of school-level conditions that underpin the work of these successful schools (Hopkins *et al.* 1994). Broadly stated these conditions are:

- staff development
- involvement
- leadership
- coordination
- enquiry and reflection
- collaborative planning.

Overview of the 'classroom conditions' research

These six conditions were the focus of our early work with the IQEA Project schools. More recently, we have begun to focus some of our research energies onto what we originally thought were a parallel set of conditions which relate to the notion of capacity at the classroom level. These conditions were connected in our minds to teacher development, much in the same way as the original set of conditions were to school development. As such they were supposed to be transferable across classrooms and between teachers and related to a variety of teaching/learning initiatives designed to enhance the achievement of students. At this stage in the work we adapted and simplified our original framework (as illustrated in Hopkins *et al.* 1994) to express the relationship, as we then saw it, between school and classroom conditions, and the process of change in schools. This relationship is seen in Figure 2.1.

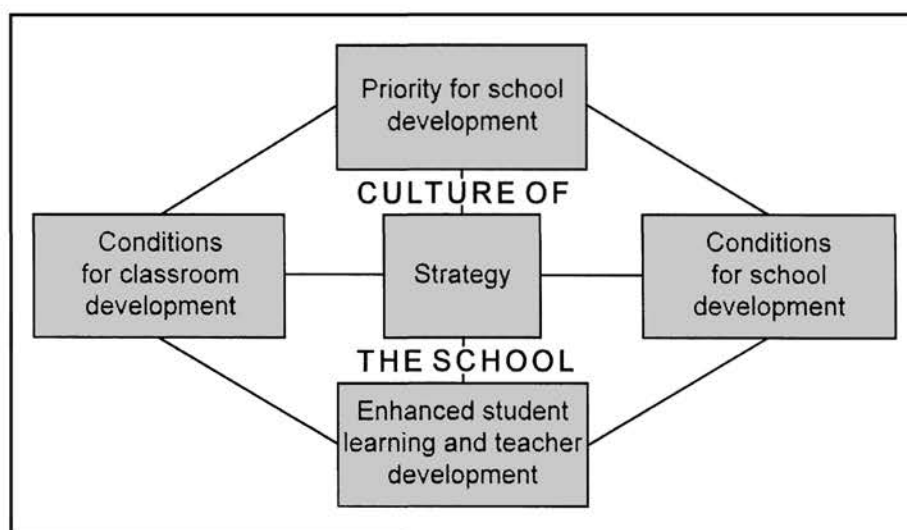


Figure 2.1 A framework for school improvement