

BUILDING THE QUALITY SCHOOL: THE REAL CHALLENGE

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ABSTRACT. Translating school reform policy into practice requires getting at the heart of what schooling is all about – an exercise difficult to pursue, easy to avoid. School reform in Québec is no exception. The call for reform has raised critical questions about what is a “quality school,” who determines it and how it is to be achieved. This article describes how a school-based project in Québec has attempted to bridge the gap between research and practice in determining school quality and highlights the views of practitioners who participated in the project as to the changes needed to get there.

RÉSUMÉ. Pour mettre en pratique la politique de réforme des écoles, il faut se plonger au coeur de ce que signifie la scolarité, exercice difficile à réaliser, mais facile à éviter. La réforme scolaire au Québec ne fait pas exception à la règle. La volonté de réforme a suscité des questions critiques sur ce que l'on entend par “une école de qualité,” sur qui en décide et sur la façon d'y parvenir. Cet article décrit la façon dont un projet scolaire au Québec a cherché à combler le fossé qui existe entre la recherche et la pratique pour déterminer la qualité d'une école et souligne les points de vue des praticiens qui ont participé au projet sur les changements qu'il faut opérer pour y parvenir.

PROLOGUE

Standing at the threshold of the new millennium, we, as educators in Québec, have cause to reflect about what we have accomplished through our school reform efforts. Many suggestions have been offered as to what can be done to build the quality school, and earnest efforts have been made to comply. In many cases, experts have been brought in to help. Now we step back to assess where we are.

To assist us with our evaluation, we have chosen pieces of a puzzle – a blue-print of what we believe makes up the quality school. The pieces all appear to be there – mission statement, curriculum, pedagogy, or-

ganization, governance, human relations, policy and so on. Many of the pieces are named; some are not. The unnamed pieces, we are told, represent aspects of the school, which 'we know are there, but cannot name.' When we try to put the pieces together, however, we find that while space has been allotted for each, the fit is far from congruent. In some instances, the pieces are separated by empty spaces; some pieces overlap the edges of others, pushing against them as if to overtake their position within the frame. In the end, our school appears as a conglomerate of piecemeal, isolated parts rather than a holistic unit. The exercise reaffirms for us that the quality school is much more than individual pieces, that it is indeed greater than the sum of its parts. Our quest continues.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Few organizations in our society have been subjected to the same level of public debate as our public schools. Cynics among us are inclined to think that the higher the volume of the rhetoric the more tenaciously practitioners cling to the tried and true. The recurring reform cycles have provided good lessons. Practitioners have long learned to ride out the waves crashing at their doorsteps, fully aware of the lull that inevitably follows when the waves recede. In the cynics' view this quiet resistance has been successful. Schools, by and large, are no different now than they have always been.

Fortunately, there are those among us who take a more moderate stance on the effects of the reform movements. Tyack, Hansot and Kirst (1980) feel that the waves of reform "do leave lasting deposits when they pass through the educational system, although not always the ones most desired" (pp. 255-256). Part of the problem, contends Price (1990) is that reform activists are working in a different time frame than school personnel. In his view, "in the 1980s new criticisms were leveled at schools, and proposed cures cropped up before earlier ones could be absorbed" (p. 242). It appears that reformers have devoted their energy into initiating 'cures' through policy without giving much thought to what follows (Cuban, 1990; Psacharopoulos, 1989). Cuban believes that "many reforms seldom go beyond getting adopted as a policy. Most get implemented in word rather than deed, especially in classrooms" (p. 9). Eisner (1995) agrees. He purports that the robustness of schools provide social stability, but at the same time deflect many attempts to bring about change. As a result, "it is much easier to change educational

policy than to change the ways in which schools function" (p. 391). The culture of school is constructed for constancy, not reform (Sirotnik, 1991, p. 256). It stands to reason, therefore, that if reform is to be absorbed, one has to work on the culture of schools -- norms, knowledge and skills -- before the structure (Elmore, 1995, p. 23).

Québec schools have not been immune to reform efforts. The current decade has witnessed movement away from centralized government control and movement toward increased school autonomy. The reform movement currently experienced in the province has been anticipated for some time. *Moving Ahead* (Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec [MEQ], 1993) foreshadowed what was to come with its call for evaluation of schools and increasing their accountability to their constituents. A government policy paper that followed, namely *Québec Schools on Course* (MEQ, 1997a), activated renewed interest in what is happening in classrooms throughout the province by inviting dialogue about what is being taught there and how. Under the auspices of the MEQ, the school community is being asked to reflect upon not only the content of classroom curriculum, but the way in which the primary deliverer of the curriculum -- the teacher -- is being prepared for his or her role.

The thrust of the school reform movement in Québec, be it in governance, curriculum or teacher training, focuses on building the quality school and even more specifically on building the quality classroom. School reformists in the province, as elsewhere, are aware that the success of the education system rests largely, although not exclusively, upon what transpires in the classroom -- that is, teaching and learning (Task Force on Elementary and Secondary School Learning Profiles, 1994; Task Force on Curriculum Reform, 1997). If reform is meant to support quality teaching and learning and if schools are the locus of that activity, we might well ask what is a quality school? How do we define it? Recognize it? Measure it?

Spurred by these questions and the undercurrents of reform driving them, the research branch of the MEQ began to examine ways to help schools become more reflective about what they are doing. Reflective practice entails data analysis and communication of findings to those having a vested interest in the school, namely its stakeholders (MEQ, 1995a, 1995b, 1996). It is within this context that the project *Schools Speaking to Stakeholders* was conceived. Initiated in 1994 and extending to June 1998, the project was a collaborative effort of the English sector of the MEQ, the Office of Research on Educational Policy of McGill

University (OREP), and various school boards within the Anglophone educational community. While the direct aim of the project was to provide a framework for the collection and dissemination of information about schools, the underlying purpose was to promote school improvement and foster policies and practices which support this goal (Smith, Bordanaro, Sturge Sparkes & Travers, 1996).

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the dialogue about school reform in Québec schools by looking at what was learned in the *Schools Speaking to Stakeholders* project about building the quality school. First, we will look briefly at the body of literature which formed the theoretical foundation for the project. Then we will look in greater detail at the framework for measuring school quality developed in the project. Finally, we will further the discussion of what was learned by inviting various participants to dialogue about what can be done to improve the quality of the school.

BUILDING THE QUALITY SCHOOL: VIEWS FROM THE LITERATURE

Our revelation through the puzzle exercise takes us back to what the literature has told us about building the quality school. We hope that by revisiting the writings we will find the answer to what has caused the unsettling asymmetry in our portrait. What needs to be added or clarified?

In our search for answers we turn to what has been written, in particular the school effectiveness, school improvement and school performance literatures. It appears that current thinking about the quality school emerges particularly from the school effectiveness and school improvement literatures demarcated by historical and philosophical differences. In a nutshell, the school effectiveness literature, programmed for research, explains cause-effect relationships in the school environment. The school improvement literature, programmed for innovation, focuses on change and problem solving. While differences are apparent, these differences do not preclude the possibility for linkages (Reynolds, Hopkins & Stoll, 1993). The school performance literature, a later addition to the discussion, emerged from both the school effectiveness and school improvement literatures, as well as adopting material from farther afield, that of organizational management. This body of literature aims to put into more practical terms issues of performance measurement. Efforts under the domain of school effectiveness can help the school community answer the question 'What elements create the effective school?' Efforts in the school improvement area can move

reform efforts ahead by responding to the question 'How can we do what we are doing better?', while school performance focuses on the question 'How are we doing?' All these literatures have merit in their own right and together give valuable insight into determining how to build the quality school.

Our intent in the *Schools Speaking to Stakeholders* project was to build on the school effectiveness literature to help us to determine what we wanted first to look at in schools, in short, the content. The school performance literature was then used to determine how to measure the content. Finally, the school improvement literature was used to determine how to bring about change for improvement. Time being at a premium, we were only able to explore content and how to measure it. Unfortunately, we could not extend our efforts to matters of school improvement. While issues of measurement were critical to the project they are less useful for purposes of this paper. Therefore, our exploration here will be confined to the school effectiveness literature. Before looking at what this literature tells us, let us briefly turn our attention to how we define the quality school.

Defining the quality school

The first question we need to address is what is meant by the term 'quality school.' Fuller (1986) explores four categories of quality definitions, namely technical production process, individual abilities and perceptions, school and classroom organizations, and institutional signals. While acknowledging the inherent virtues in each, he admits that if we are to arrive at a true picture of what makes a quality school, we must avoid looking through discrete, exclusionary lenses. As our understanding about what makes a quality school increases, the indicators used for measuring, he notes, have "become more complex, more colorful, and less agreed upon" (p. 61). At the end of the day, he concedes, "it is not easy to pin down this slippery concept" (p. 61). Others agree.

Freeland (1991) tackles the topic by citing the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report, *Schools and Quality* (p. 61). He states:

Despite the need for focus, a single, tight definition of 'quality' would require making two questionable assumptions, first, that underlying the complexity of education systems is a set of relatively clear and non-conflicting goals that provide the measure of whether quality is being achieved, second, that it should be possible to apply these goals across OECD countries despite their diverse traditions and culture

and the variety of conditions prevailing even within national frontiers. It would also entail assuming that educational improvement is to be achieved through a standard model or plan that can be implemented in a 'top-down' fashion.

Fuller and Freeland agree that determining a definitive answer for school quality, one that will apply to all contexts, is a formidable, if not an impossible, task. We have a sense of what we are looking for, but are at a loss to articulate how it is to be measured and under what conditions. Glasser (1990), in concordance with his colleagues, admits: "It would be extremely difficult to come up with an exact definition of quality education that would apply to all situations. Even without being able to define it, however, we can almost always recognize it when we see it" (p. 6).

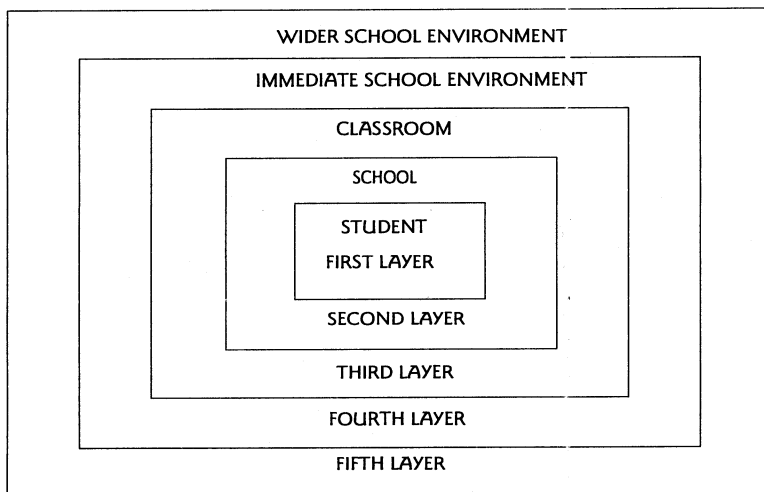
At this point it is undoubtedly obvious to the reader why many education researchers are loathe to get embroiled in the definition debate, electing instead to explore ways of determining the quality school. In the next few sections we will briefly look at how the literature attempts to do this.

To reiterate Glasser's thoughts, even though we might not be able to define what we are seeing, we are able to identify a quality school when we see it. What do we see? First of all, when we talk about a quality school we usually talk about it holistically, looking, as it were, at the big picture. We may be cognizant of specific elements such as student achievement, but realize that it is an important, though not exclusive, attribute of such a school. At the same time, we have some sense of how things work within the organization. We see relationships. We see the school as a composite of classrooms in which what teachers do bears some relation to what students learn. We see the school as a centre of human interaction, not only within the confines of the school itself but beyond.

The model in Figure 1 (p. 287) represents this way of thinking. The school is imaged as a nested layer – a unit of analysis – within a larger environment. This representation builds on Bosker and Scheeren's (1994) notion of *contextual effects*, in which the school is a part, a cell, as it were, of a large, dynamic organism. Taking this view, we see that the school, while being a highly individualized entity, still depends upon its surroundings for nurture and support.

The reader will note that in this model, the student is located at the core, and is continuously impacted upon by layering components of the learning community. The intensity of the impact depends upon the immediacy of the variables. Wang, Haertel and Walberg (1993) distin-

FIGURE 1. The nested layers of the school



NOTE: Adapted from *School Performance and Change: Implications for Education Management Development* (p. 143) by W.J. Smith, 1997. Montreal/Johannesburg: Canada-South Africa Education Management Program.

guish between variables that are close to the student, *proximal* variables, as opposed to those farther away, identified as *distal*. In their view, members of the school community who wish to improve the quality of education are more likely to achieve success if they attend to proximal variables such as classroom instruction rather than distal variables such as school board and provincial policies.

The nested layers model effectively portrays at a macro-level the school and the forces that play around it. However, to get to the heart of how well these factors affect school performance, a more micro-level analysis is necessary. We need to sift through the big picture and look at the components. By doing so, we break the school down into separate parts, parts which lend themselves more readily to scrutiny.

The school effectiveness literature

To determine the quality of a school, we need, in Goodlad's (1984) words, "to understand it" (p. xvi). The school effectiveness literature takes us beyond recognizing quality in a generic sense by helping us to identify where we can begin to look – "to understand" – the organization we know as school. The effectiveness literature, we

might add, helps to isolate the components of the school organization, and the school performance literature provides the tools for measuring the impact of these components on student achievement, thereby paving the way for school improvement. The school effectiveness literature, therefore, plays a significant role in sharpening notions of what creates a quality school.

Simplistically speaking, the school effectiveness literature aims "to understand, to know objectively how education works, and to explain its processes and outcomes in terms of stable causes and effects" (Creemers & Reezigt, 1997, p. 399). The literature emerged in reaction to studies by Coleman et al. (1966) and Jencks et al. (1972) who claimed that 'schools do not make a difference.' Studies that followed held the more optimistic view that schools do have an effect on pupil functioning (Edmonds, 1979; Goodlad, 1976). For much of the research under the umbrella of school effectiveness, the major measure of 'pupil functioning' is performance on standardized tests. The research sought to identify the characteristics of the school which correlated with high levels of achievement so measured. Researchers produced tests of these characteristics, as illustrated in Table 1 (p. 289) (see also Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Purkey & Smith, 1983).

In early research, aggregated scores on standardized tests were widely used as the benchmark to explore what was perceived as the two dimensions of school effectiveness, namely quality and equity (Cuttance, 1987). Creemers (1994) describes quality in terms of "the degree to which schools score better or worse than can be expected on the basis of the different pupil input into those schools" (p. 11). Equity, Creemers (1994) regards as "the hypothesized influence of schools to interact in the relationship between student input and student output" (p. 12). In short, effective schools were thought of as organizations in which students fare well on standardized tests and in which optimal use is made of resources to ensure that such outcomes are achieved.

Various models have surfaced in the literature attempting to explain the quality-equity relationship by identifying individual variables and studying their effects on high test scores. Five factors in particular appeared with such frequency that they were identified as the '5-factor model' (Creemers, 1994). The model is comprised of the following correlates of educational achievement: strong educational leadership; high expectations of student achievement; an emphasis on basic skills; a safe and orderly climate; and frequent evaluation of pupils' progress. Although researchers were receptive to this model, at least for a period

TABLE 1. Eleven factors for effective schools

THEME	ELEMENTS
1. Professional leadership	Firm and purposeful A participative approach The leading professional
2. Shared vision and goals	Unity of purpose Consistency of practice Collegiality and collaboration
3. A learning environment	An orderly atmosphere An attractive working environment
4. Concentration on teaching and learning	Maximization of learning time Academic emphasis Focus on achievement
5. Purposeful teaching	Efficient organization Clarity of purpose Structured lessons Adaptive practice
6. High expectations	High expectations all round Communicating expectations Providing intellectual change
7. Positive reinforcement	Clear and fair discipline Feedback
8. Monitoring progress	Monitoring pupil performance Evaluating school performance
9. Pupil rights and responsibilities	Raising pupil self-esteem Positions of responsibility Control of work
10. Home-school partnership	Parental involvement in their children's learning
11. A learning organization	School-based staff development

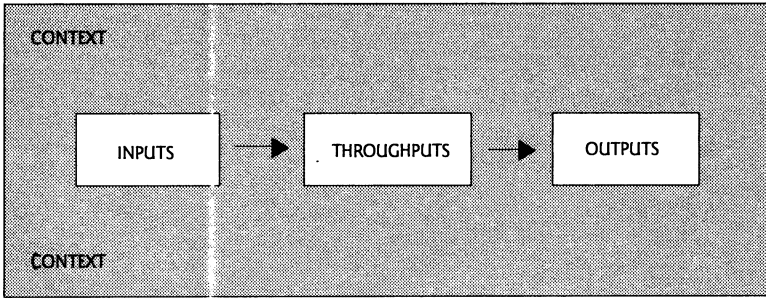
NOTE: From *Key Characteristics of Effective Schools: A review of school effectiveness research* (p. 8) by P. Sammons, J. Hillman, & P. Mortimore, 1995. London: University of London, Institute of Education.

of time, critics question whether or not these correlates could be definitively regarded as causes rather than effects and whether or not they are discrete. For example, is a 'safe, orderly climate' an independent variable or is it the result of 'strong educational leadership'?

Another model that gained prominence within the school effectiveness literature is often identified as the production model. Emerging out of the field of economics, the model pictures the schooling process as linear and unidirectional (Coleman, 1975; Purkey & Smith, 1983). As shown in Figure 2 (p. 290), the *outputs*, the results of schooling are contingent upon components brought into the process, the *inputs*, and how these inputs are processed, the *throughputs*. Oakes (1989) and

Porter (1991) add to the model *context*, elements which influence schooling outputs, but cannot be readily categorized as inputs or throughputs.

FIGURE 2. Input-Output model of schooling



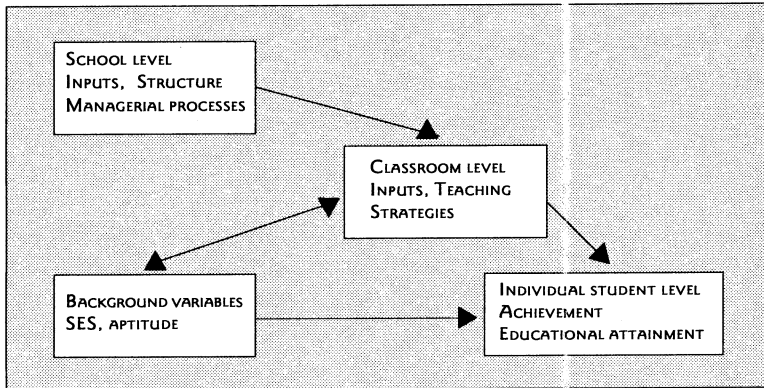
NOTE: Adapted from *School Performance and Change: Implications for Education Management Development* (p. 137) by W.J. Smith, 1997. Montreal/Johannesburg: Canada-South Africa Education Management Program.

The production model presents a concise picture of what happens in schools, and has made a valuable contribution to the discussion. However, dissatisfaction has been expressed about the narrowness and rigidity of the template and the difficulty with applying laws of economics to the operation of schools (Bezeau, 1993). Schooling is not a unidirectional process nor is it comprised of variables that are easily distinguishable from each other or have clearly defined causal-effect relationships. The laws of economies of scale are not easily applied to schools, in general, or to the learning experiences of students in particular.

Other bodies of research in school effectiveness have tried to capture a more multilevel, multifactor image of what creates an effective school (Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993). In their model, Scheerens and Creemers (1989), include a level of school organization and management, a teacher and/or classroom level, and a level of individual student performance and background. The model, shown in Figure 3 (p. 291), captures the recent trend in the literature of focusing on what transpires in the classroom (Creemers & Reezgiz, 1997; Stoll & Fink, 1994). Taking the 'inside-out' notion of schooling reflected in Figure 1 (p. 287), we note that the classroom is nested in the school. It stands to reason that in identifying the effective school one would expect to find effective classrooms. Following Wang, Haertel and Walberg's (1993) notion of proximal and distal variables, one can assume that what is closest to the student as far as their schooling experience is concerned would have

the most profound effect on what they accomplish there. Quality of instruction, an aspect of classroom climate, for example, has received much attention in the research literature, particularly in relation to its impact upon learning outcomes (Brophy & Good, 1986; Weinert, Schrader & Helmke, 1989).

FIGURE 3. A contextual, multilevel, multifactor model of school effectiveness



NOTE: Adapted from *The History, Value and Purpose of School Effectiveness Studies* (p. 14). By B. Creemers, (1994). In D. Reynolds, B. Creemers, J. Bird, & S. Farel. (1994). *Advances in School Effectiveness Research and Practice* (pp. 9-23). Oxford, UK: Pergamon.

The central role of instruction comes to light in such areas as instructional skills, instructional strategies, classroom management and the curriculum (Stoll & Fink, 1994, p. 167). Each of these elements are critical to our understanding of the components of the effective classroom and, at the next level, the effective school. However, as with most attributes that may effect student achievement, arriving at reliable ways of measuring these components is no easy feat.

That having been said, the issue of standards or criteria is fundamental to the quality question. Generally speaking, society is far from satisfied to apply the same criteria to our schools as applied to marketable goods. As stated by Sizer, McDonald and Rogers, (1992-93), "good standards are not things that are clear, discrete, and fit for checklists" (p. 30). The search for quality, especially in the things we regard as most significant in our lives and the lives of our children, always lead us to ask for more. The quality debate inevitably spurs us to ask: "Quality of what?" (Freeland, 1991, p. 62) "Quality for whom?" (Freeland, 1991, p. 62; Smith, 1997, p. 135). It is the 'more' that propels us to search for

workable, valid ways to measure what we expect of our schools. "Articulating what the 'more' is," according to Gray and Wilcox (1995), "remains a major challenge but will come, one hopes, to form the cornerstone of how schools find themselves judged over the next decade" (p. 12).

THE QUALITY SCHOOL: A FRAMEWORK FOR DISCUSSION

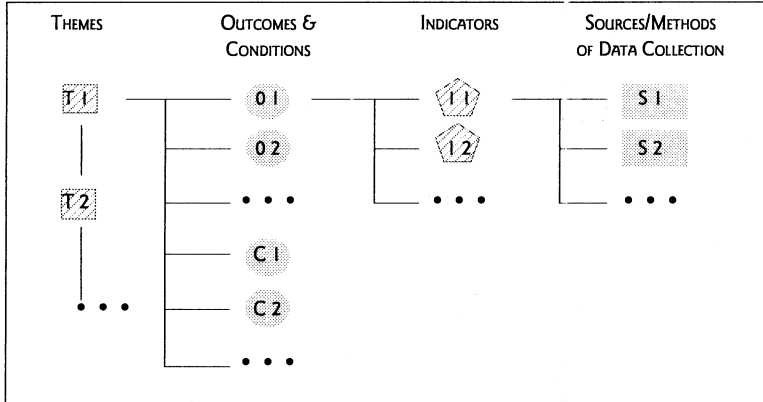
In the previous section we explored some models for determining an effective school. We have found that over the years, proponents of the school effectiveness literature have recognized the need to expand the way we think about the effective school (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1988; Townsend, 1994). In effect, by expanding the criteria, we are compelled to move beyond the limiting descriptor of 'effective' to a broader notion of 'quality'. After all, a school can be effective, that is, successful at achieving its goals, while not being a desirable choice for many students.

In the school performance area, considerable work has been done in the United States by the National Center on Education Outcomes [NCEO] to explore variables identified as outcomes of the schooling process (Ysseldyke & Thurlow, 1993). For Ysseldyke and his colleagues, outcomes have a broader dimension than outputs. They are looked upon as the desired results of schooling, including those which are immediate and directly linked to schooling (Smith, Bordanaro, Sturge Sparkes & Travers, 1996). From this perspective, test scores are only one of a wider roster of what is desirable about the schooling experience. In their work, Ysseldyke and Thurlow (1993) have expanded the outcome repertoire to include such domains as social and personal learning, and student participation.

To reiterate, one of the aims of our project was to put into practice what we had learned from the literature, particularly from the school effectiveness and school performance perspectives. We wanted to apply what was known through research about the quality school in the everyday realities of the schooling experience within the Québec context. Building on the generic framework designed by Ysseldyke, Thurlow and Vanderwood (1994), we wanted to look at not only the outcomes of schooling but to expand our exploration to the elements that nurture and support these outcomes, namely the conditions. We felt that while conditions play an essential supportive role in outcome achievement (see Figure 4, p. 193), they are also valuable in their own right. Members of the school community, we believe, are just as concerned about

the conditions, the contextual experiences, of daily life in school as they are with the credentials that are ultimately earned there (Smith & Bordanaro, 1996; Smith, Bordanaro, Sturge Sparkes & Travers, 1996; Smith, Peera, & Sturge Sparkes, 1997).

FIGURE 4 Generic framework for the development of performance indicators

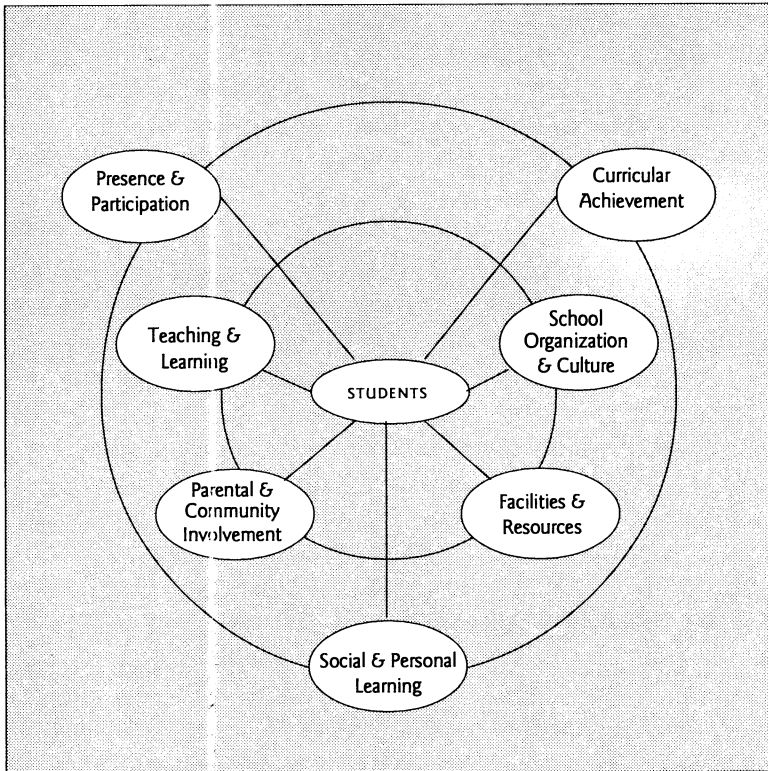


NOTE: Adapted from *Possible Sources of Data for School Completion Indicators* (p. 3) by J.E. Ysseldyke, M.L. Thurlow & M.L. Vanderwood, 1994. Minneapolis, MN: NCEO.

During the project, a framework was developed by teams of educators from participating schools to sharpen what we wanted to explore. Figure 5 (p. 294) illustrates the relationship of the outcomes and the conditions that ultimately emerged. The reader will note that the student, as with the nested layers model (Figure 1, p. 287), is at the core of the framework, surrounded by the conditions, the daily, ongoing experiences of schooling depicted in terms of *Teaching & Learning*, *School Organization & Culture*, *Facilities & Resources*, and *Parent & Community Involvement*. The outcomes, both short-term and long-term goals of schooling, which in some ways have less immediate, daily impact on students, are found in the periphery. The outcomes identified are: *Presence & Participation*, *Curricular Achievement*, and *Social & Personal Learning*.

The framework, housing both outcomes and condition themes, provides the basis for a detailed look at the school Table 2 (p. 295) illustrates a sample of how the condition theme, *Teaching & Learning*, and the outcome theme, *Presence & Participation*, comprise various outcomes or conditions, as the case may be, each of which constitutes an element of school quality.

FIGURE 5. Outcome and condition themes



NOTE: Adapted from *Schools Speaking to Stakeholders: Project Report: 1996-98* (p. 22) by C. Sturge Sparkes & W.J. Smith, 1998. Montreal, QC: McGill University, Office of Research on Educational Policy.

The *Schools Speaking to Stakeholders* project taught us many things about determining the quality school. We learned that the process is far more complex than we initially thought, primarily because of the complexity of the school organization. The nested layers imaged in Figure 1 (p. 287), we realized, are only the tip of the iceberg. Subsumed under each layer are other layers interacting not only with each other but with components in other layers. We found, like Glasser, that even though we knew what we were seeing, determining how to measure it was a different matter entirely. We completed our project with more questions than answers – a valuable lesson in its own right.

From the preceding discussion we get a glimpse of what we believe is only the beginning of how we describe the quality school. We know that it is about more. It is about more than the market rule of supply and demand. It is about curriculum content, critical thinking and values. It is about community and individuality – about helping people strive to be the best that they can be. 'Being the best' embodies all aspects of

TABLE 2. Indicators and instruments for selected themes

THEME: TEACHING AND LEARNING	
Conditions	
C.1	Teachers have high expectations for students
C.2	Curriculum content is appropriate
C.3	The teacher uses a variety of teaching methods
C.4	The teacher uses a variety of evaluation methods
THEME: PRESENCE AND PARTICIPATION	
Outcomes	
O.1	Students complete high school requirements
O.2	Students participate in schoolwork
O.3	Students participate in extra-curricular activities (academic, cultural, sports/recreation, student governance)

NOTE: Adapted from *Schools Speaking to Stakeholders: Project Report: 1996-98* (pp. 24-25) by C. Sturge Sparkes & W.J. Smith, 1998. Montreal, QC: McGill University, Office of Research on Educational Policy.

what it is to live a meaningful life, not only in the achievement of prestige and material goods, but in broader, deeper dimensions.

Revisiting the literature and participating in a school-based assessment project has shed some light on building the quality school, but questions remained. We realized at the end of the project that a large piece of the puzzle had yet to be explored. We had gathered information about our schools, but were unable to use what we had learned to move to improvement. In an effort to initiate discussion on school reform, it was decided to explore the topic with education practitioners who had participated in the project. Diane Fyfe, Margaret Dupuis, and Thérèse Taylor work with the Western Québec School Board; Jim Sullivan with the MEQ. What follows is an encapsulation of their ideas. Some of the ideas are presented verbatim (appearing in inverted commas); others are paraphrased.

BUILDING THE QUALITY SCHOOL: VOICES FROM THE FIELD

The section below is a synopsis, in thematic form, of thoughts on what is needed to improve schools, thereby building toward the quality school.

Theme 1: A quality school articulates its vision and goals.

For a school to be described as a 'quality' school, it needs to have a clear sense of why it exists, in short, to have a purpose. Two of the respondents addressed this issue. Jim stated that the school, as part of a social community, needs to respond to the demands of society. While part of its mandate must be to transmit knowledge and skills, education needs to go further to develop critical thinking. Society requires that schools turn out not only educated people, in a narrow sense of what educated means, but also "citizens for a complex world." Diane imagined the school as a place for meaning-making. In her view, "if they [the students] are to make sense of their world, then we must provide an environment which is conducive for them to do that." Both Diane and Jim would probably agree with Bruner (1996) who reflects that schools need to become "rather like countercultures-centres for the cultivation of a new awareness about what it is like living in a modern society" (p. 82).

By and large schools are aware of, at least in some esoteric way, why they exist. They often have, to repeat a word used by both Jim and Diane "a vision." Diane cited Conley (1996) who likens vision to an "internal compass" which, in Diane's words, are "values, beliefs, purposes and goals" shared by people within an organization "to guide their directions and actions." However, the point was also raised, especially by Diane that a quality school makes a point of articulating the vision. She stated, "I firmly believe that we must *write down our vision and institutionalize* it. It then becomes clear to all the builders the reasons behind the decisions" that are made.

Clearly, the real challenge to goal setting lies in institutionalizing the goal. Margaret and Thérèse used words like 'consensus' and 'team building' when talking about establishing goals. Thérèse suggested that consensus exists when "everybody agrees to work towards the same goal. Even if it was not their own idea, enough discussions and explanations take place that all partners accept the goal for the best of the school, for the children."

In a nutshell, the quality school has a clear sense of what its vision is and takes the time and effort to articulate it to all members of its community. Importantly, members of the school community feel that they are a part of the 'purpose setting' process and arrive at a common understanding and agreement of what it is. Beyond this, the quality school strives to build its vision – its goals – into its culture so that its vision is realized in the daily operations of the organization.

Theme 2: A quality school asks "Where are we?" and "Where do we go from here?"

All of the respondents agreed that a quality school is receptive to change, not only for the sake of doing things differently, but change that is geared to improving the current organization.

For change to be effective, it needs to be grounded in knowledge about how the organization is doing at present. The respondents were unanimous in the view that such knowledge is acquired through ongoing self-assessment. Thérèse believes that a quality school "needs to be able to look objectively at where it is and where it wishes to be." The image of where it is at present, "should be more than a snapshot. It should be like an ongoing film." Assessment is not a one-shot deal. It needs to be done "on a regular basis – for small issues and big issues. It should also be continued after change is initiated."

Engaging in self-assessment is a risky business. Less-than-complementary things are bound to surface. "A survey is often an eye opener," stated Margaret, "especially when people find out that things are not as rosy as they thought." In some schools, the staff choose to ignore the information or reacted to it defensively. To an administrator wishing to build a quality school, however, the revelation, according to Margaret, becomes an opportunity to "make lemonade out of lemons by offering [the] staff an opportunity to identify the good work they are doing and find ways to improve on areas which may need improvement."

Diane agreed. She feels that assessing 'where we are at the moment' is a critical first step to determining 'where we want to go.' The outcomes of the process pave the way for reflection, which in her view, is a necessary prerequisite for "renewal and revitalization, and therefore, in many ways a rebirth."

That is not to say that self-assessment will flush out only what is wrong in the organization. On the contrary, it can be, according to Jim, a "good measure of what is being done well." Surprises come in both guises, and while the process may indicate where our weaknesses lie, it may also inform us that "maybe we are doing better than we thought." A quality school, stated Thérèse, while always aiming to do better, is more than willing to "celebrate success" no matter how small the steps.

People wishing to build a quality school, it appears, are not afraid to engage in honest, open self-appraisal. They acknowledge what they are doing well

and give themselves ample opportunity for reflection. They use the information acquired from the process for redirection and growth.

Theme 3: A quality school embraces public policy as a catalyst for change.

The quality school is receptive to change especially change that is self-initiated. Schools as we know them, however, are embedded in a larger society, and are profoundly affected by the laws governing that society. Within our current context, public policy, initiated directly or indirectly through the government, is influencing Québec schools in three broad areas: budget compressions; school board and school governance restructuring; and curricular reform. While these changes are not self-imposed, what singles out a quality school from the others is what it does with these changes.

A couple of the respondents agreed with this view. Jim suggested that the *Act to Amend the Education Act and Various Legislative Provisions*, the legislation initiating new ways of governing schools, mobilizes public thinking about how school communities can increase investment in its schools. In his words, the Act “puts a spotlight on what needs to be done. It creates a space within the system whereby schools can address how to involve their public” in the building of a quality learning environment. Diane stated that a forward looking school turns the changes initiated by this Act into a positive experience – one that “embraces more involvement of [its] school community in the daily running of the school.”

Jim and Diane echoed the views of Hopkins (1996) who has written extensively about the role of public policy and school change. In his model, Hopkins (1996) identifies major components having direct effect on change. One, “the givens”, are described by Smith (1997) as “aspects of the change process which are not readily amenable to manipulation, namely the external impetus for change and the school’s background, organization and values” (p. 158). Another component, the “capacity-building dimension,” focuses on the need for macro-level change, that is, change initiated outside of the school environment, to enhance the conditions of the school and the classroom at the micro-level. Hopkins (1996) acknowledges that public policy – the ‘external impetus’ – can be an effective catalyst for change provided that it “is concerned with the process as well as the substance of change at the teacher and school level” (p. 41). In effect, public policy plays a critical role if it creates, in Jim’s words not only a “space in the system”, but addresses how change will play out within the system. Change will be

welcomed if schools are given the opportunity to play a proactive role, in short to embrace the possibilities of what the change will bring.

Theme 4: A quality school regards itself as an organic organization.

A quality school is welcome to change because of how it thinks of itself as an organization. The adage "attitude is everything" is clearly evident here. Such a school does not view itself in terms of statically defined boundaries, but as boundaries that are fluid and constantly dynamic. As a result, the school is continuously open to the possibility, even the necessity, of change. This position is reflected in all aspects of the school community which will be explored in the following sub-sections: the school as a collaborative learning community; the school as centre for change; and, change as an evolving, transparent process.

THE SCHOOL AS A COLLABORATIVE LEARNING COMMUNITY. A quality school does not limit who is a part of its community. In this view, resources, especially its human resources, are limitless. The quality school values these resources, not only in the restrictive sense of inputs but as relationships to be nurtured. The school, in essence, is not only an organization where people learn but is a learning organization. "It is important," stated Diane, "that we continue to be learners, to promote learning among all our stakeholders and become models for our students." Diane prefers to use the word *builders* rather than stakeholders. In her view, the learning organization provides the opportunity for the builders "to build on their strengths." "Everyone," she continued, "should be able to feel [that they are] a competent part of the whole organization."

The reader may feel compelled at this point to ask, "Who are these builders?" The following possibilities are offered:

Teachers, administrators, and students. One would assume that these groups are a given within the school context. All schools have people who take on these roles. In the quality school, however, roles are viewed differently. In many schools, learning is an isolated activity. Educators carry out their duties with limited connection to others, and students regard learning as a competitive rather than collaborative experience. Administrators, teachers, and particularly students do not look at themselves as members of a team, but as players assigned individual duties having restricted bearing on what is being done by others.

A quality school bases its roles on a common vision. The vision serves as a catalyst for connection, shifting the focus away from individual roles to, in Thérèse's words, "partnership goals." In her view, a quality

school "is where everybody, students, teachers, staff and principal, are involved in a continuous learning process." Redefining the roles in these terms have a positive effect on the school by building, according to Pauline Marois (Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, April, 1997b), "the capacity of schools to adapt their services to the needs and characteristics of the populations they serve" (p. 14).

Parents. In many schools, parents are important contributors to the organization. In the quality school, however, the relationship is a partnership with a bidirectional interface (Gaskell, 1995; Stout, 1993). The question raised is not only 'What can parents do for the school?', but 'What can the school do for the parents?' Schools recognizing the symbiotic nature of this relationship make a point of offering programs and services for parents and members of the wider community, as well as benefiting from the services provided by its public.

In Québec, the restructuring of school governance has strengthened parent voice in the daily operations of the school. Parents, who take their position within this new partnership seriously and focus on the common good will prove to be an invaluable asset in quality school building.

Establishing this new partnership is not a smooth process. For years, many schools have tended to be clandestine about their daily operations, preferring to hold the parents at arms' length. The new partnership demands an openness not built into some school cultures. School builders need to be challenged to work on their relationship. Education leaders can serve as a catalyst in this regard. As Director-General, Diane, for example, has invited her school leaders to create an action plan for their school "to help rally your staffs, students, parents and communities to create a compelling vision" for development.

Other partners. The isolation found in schools also exists between schools and partners in both the public and private sectors. The potential for partnership with such agencies is potent because even though these agencies are outside the immediate school environment they are in many ways connected to it.

The university is exemplary of this untapped resource. The university community has much to offer schools especially in areas of research and development. Within the framework of partnership, the university can help to engage schools in action research and work with a common goal to explore how, according to Jim, "theory translates into practice." Such efforts include strengthening the contact between students at all

levels of their education journey. Students from schools, for example, could work closely with university students to engage in various learning activities on campus.

Partnerships with agencies are not confined to education institutions. Schools can twin with government bodies, in, for example, health and social services, to determine issues particularly pertinent to these agencies that could be addressed in the school community. Building upon what is already taking place in some school communities in the province, stronger partnerships could be established with private organizations, particularly, although not exclusively, in areas such as science and technology. Schools can be training centers for personnel in various industries and, at the same time, benefit from industry expertise. Learning need not be confined to the school. Students could interface with employees in their work environment, thereby, according to Jim, "expanding the boundaries of schooling."

The quality school, therefore, regards partnerships as its most important asset. It continuously looks for possibilities to expand educational opportunities for all the people who are a part of its community. Structures and boundaries do not prohibit development. The demarcation between the school and external agencies are regarded as artificially imposed and subject to altering when and where the need arises. Curriculum is driven by the desire, the vision, to pursue what is possible, it is not confined to the structure of textbook and physical boundaries.

THE SCHOOL AS A CENTRE OF CHANGE. Change, whether initiated externally or internally, is welcomed in a quality school. For change to be welcomed, however, the school must build into its organization a culture for change. Such a culture, according to Diane, consists of the following: "enthusiasm for the visioning process; willingness to take calculated risks; experimentation; celebration of success; and, forgiveness for failures." Schools need to acquire a synergy for change. Change demands action. It demands energy, fueled by the willingness to aspire to a vision of what can be accomplished.

Risk taking is a necessary companion to change. Unfortunately, educators are not trained for this. Risk taking is not encouraged in teacher training programs, nor nurtured in most school environments. Conformity, even complacency, is the preferred norm. For change to occur, however, "people," stated Thérèse, "need to get out of their comfort zone. They need to feel safe about being risk takers."

To buy into risk taking, members of the school community need to be drawn into the dialogue about change and the results it will bring. The principal is identified by a number of the contributors as critical in this process. Margaret recommended that if a principal wishes to initiate change, he or she must inform teachers "that you will back them and support them, and work as hard as they will to bring about change. To work as a team the staff must feel that they can depend on you for support." Thérèse agreed. In her view, "it is impossible for a principal to expect any changes if teachers and parents are not supporting it – are not part of the decision or see the validity of change. It is important," she continued, "for principals to actively listen to all stakeholders. Actively means that even if all the ideas differ, it is important to understand the reasoning behind the opinion."

Change is vital for growth, a condition fully recognized in the quality school. To reiterate, such a school recognizes that change involves risk – an attribute not inherently found in many institutions of learning. A school wishing for change to be a part of its culture, needs to *consciously* build change into its environment. It will not happen by chance or by osmosis.

CHANGE AS AN EVOLVING, TRANSPARENT PROCESS. Change does not happen instantaneously. Change moves to a slow rhythm. It also involves trust-building which evolves gradually. Those of us who are members of a 'quick-fix' society, may find the pace of change irritatingly slow. Margaret provided some good advice for principals caught up in what appears to be a time-freeze: "Do not try to change everything overnight – be patient. Go with a gradual change, one thing at a time. Often your staff will come to you with improvements to your ideas. They will demand more rapid change when the fear of risk taking is eliminated."

Maintaining transparency is as important during the process of change as during its initiation. Builders of the school community like to be kept informed about how things are progressing. They want to know both sides of the situation – not only the positive. "Be honest when telling staff that in the first couple of years they should not expect everything to be perfect – there will be glitches," suggested Margaret to principals. "Be open to criticism," she added, "the staff is not criticizing you – they are criticizing the change." Thérèse expanded on this openness to include parents. "It is easier to arrive at a consensus," she advised, "if teachers and parents understand the rationale behind each other's ideas."

A school that sees itself as having the propensity for growth and development is likely to evolve into a quality learning environment. It is not bound by tradition or limited in scope. It looks beyond the norm for expertise – it seeks out input in unlikely places. The only known held by a quality school is that change is inevitable. Change is looked upon as a welcomed guest rather than an unwanted intruder. Such a view is not only articulated, but is enculturated there. Self-evaluation and improvement are not merely talked about, they are lived.

CONCLUSION

We return to our puzzle. Our readings and discussion have helped us name the 'unnamed' pieces. Articulated and institutionalized vision, redefined community, self-assessment, and commitment to change within a dynamic, flexible organization begin to fill the empty spaces. The puzzle, the blue-print, of the quality school begins to take shape.

The literature has helped us in our efforts by challenging us to think about the components of the quality school and how to measure them. Through the project, we were able to apply what we had learned from the literature to the everyday realities of schools. The project served as a meeting point between education theorist and practitioner, between research and practice. This paper, through discussion with practitioners, has attempted to move the dialogue ahead to what is needed to improve schools, a critical step in the movement towards school reform.

Through the exercise we have cause to reflect on what it takes to build a quality school. Recent reform efforts in Québec such as those found in school governance and curriculum compel us to raise the question of what we as a society understand by quality and whose responsibility it will be to define it. Should determining quality be the responsibility of the school or the the state, or should it be a mutual endeavour? Posing these questions is much easier than finding the answers. Beyond that, the *real* challenge, the building of the quality school, begins.

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