

Measuring Education - A Better Way?

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To make schools accountable for their performance and provide comparative information on schools by inviting students, teachers and parents to evaluate the school's culture using Culture Mapping would be a faster, fairer, more subtle and more useful process than the top-down bureaucratic approach of Whole School Evaluation

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As a professional engaged in issues of culture and change from a whole-systems perspective, and a taxpayer who believes there's room for improvement in the way public services such as education are provided, I've been waiting for the debate on Whole School Evaluation (WSE) to deepen and for some wisdom to emerge on the part of everyone involved: Education Minister Mary Hanafin and her department, the principals, teachers and their unions, and the parents and students who are the 'customers' for the education process.

In principle, everyone wants the same thing: information, improvement and excellence. What's on the cards, I suspect, is a compromise that won't serve anyone's interests fully. No-one denies the rights of parents and students to information about schools. Or the need to build accountability into the provision of education. Or the need to provide schools with a solid basis for directing their efforts towards improvement. The question is how to do this in the most effective and least bureaucratic way.

Instead of a deepening conversation however, the complex issue of assessing school performance seems to have narrowed to a confrontation around how easy it will be to identify and scapegoat teachers, and the

consequences for the reputation of teachers and their schools. What astonishes me is that no realistic alternative to the proposed mechanism is being explored. It's WSE or nothing.

The minister defends WSEs, saying they will present a more complex view of the school than media-driven league tables. I believe she's right. But teachers say WSE's aren't complex *enough*, because school performance is shaped by many variables, including the ability of individual students, home culture and parental commitment, the wider culture of the community in which the school sits, and of course the resources and amenities at their disposal. And I believe they're also right.

Meanwhile, at a rate of 300 school evaluations completed per year, a single round of the education system will take more than a decade, and another decade before a second round is complete and education professionals have an opportunity to consider what improvements have been achieved.

There's a real possibility that the vast amounts of paper produced will do little to serve the stated purpose of informing parents and students, and helping to improve school performance. Indeed the outcome could well be an increased level of bureaucracy and a twenty-year delay in system feedback which no self-respecting professional in education would choose, or defend.

There has to be a better way. And there is. However it requires a mindshift in how we think about organisations and how we approach change.

Old Thinking vs New Thinking

The way we manage things is influenced, even dictated by, the way we look at the world. Today's pervasive focus on measurement systems and performance indicators as tools of management is rooted in a 'modernist' worldview founded on the Newtonian belief that we live in an orderly world, where causes lead to known effects and where it's possible to make simple links between actions and consequences. Its basic tenet is that pretty much everything is predictable, knowable and manageable, and that if we can just figure out the rules by which something works, we can 'improve' it, like a mechanic tweaks a machine to improve its performance.

The language and 'tools' of management such as re-engineering, downsizing, relocating, embedding, rolling out, going forward, inputs and outputs, benchmarking, measurement and so on, are all classic Newtonian. So too is the illusion that school league tables amount to objective, comparative 'evidence'.

It's ironic that just as the public sector is beginning to adopt the hard metrics so beloved of managers in the private sector, the private sector is slowly recognising the limitations of such practices and starting to move beyond them, towards a new way of thinking.

Newton's ideas have been updated by a post-modernist view of the world, typified by the ideas of Einstein and theories of chaos and complexity which describe a non-linear environment where everything affects everything else. As Scottish-born naturalist John Muir once wrote: *"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe."*

In other words, science has revealed that we're not cogs in predictable, cause-and-effect machines, but participants in complex living systems which move according to quite different principles. Systems within which we are woven together through infinite numbers of human and non-human relationships that overlap and combine in unpredictable ways to influence the nature and quality of the world we experience.

To understand our everyday experience from a whole-systems perspective, is to appreciate that the visible,

material world we can experience and judge is the *secondary effect* of relationships that are *invisible*, and it is these *relationships between things* that shape events. If we are serious about improving the quality of our institutions and organisations we must work with the principles of living systems and focus not on the surface phenomena, but on the underlying relationships that shape them.

Management at odds with reality

One thing we have learned about the repertoire of ideas and practices anchored in Newton's world, and which the public sector is now importing, is that they nearly always have unintended consequences.

For example, in 1996 the UK Labour Government set ambitious targets to move literacy and numeracy rates from their 1996 baselines of 57% and 54% respectively to 80% and 75% by 2002. Actual rates of 75% and 73% were recorded, and seen as an enormous feat of large-scale change, and politically simple 'evidence' for an electorate which had been promised 'reform'. Unfortunately, in the process, teacher morale plummeted creating longer term problems in recruitment and retention within the profession - the unintended consequence of the focus on a narrow measure of success.

When we apply a mechanistic 'fix' to problems, no matter how well intended, we destroy what's important because we fail to appreciate that the source of quality is complex and subtle. We can see this in almost everything we do. Farmers 'fix' the earth with herbicides and pesticides. Food companies 'fix' shelf-life with chemicals. Doctors 'fix' patients with pills. Managers 'fix' the bottom line by 'taking out' human 'costs'. Governments 'fix' society by focusing on the economy. And now the Department of Education is going to 'fix' schools. With its shadow side now so clearly evident, it is legitimate and urgent to ask the question: how can we improve the quality of the human experience without destroying what's really important?

I believe the answer lies in a completely different set of assumptions, and a different way of evaluating subjective experience.

The Value of Culture

The quality of experience in any human system depends on its culture. Culture is the context for everything. It is the invisible web of beliefs and assumptions and values and relationships, that continually churn through the

processes and practices that bring the culture to life - that create our 'world'.

Culture is not static. And it's not 'out there'. It is created moment by moment as the elements in the system enter into relationship with each other. Culture emerges *through* us, so we are in it, and it is in us.

As we absorb this truth, we begin to see that a school is in the people, not the other way around, and if we want to influence the culture of a school, we must work with its underlying drivers, in particular the values that inform the choices and decisions that translate into behaviours that influence what happens in the classroom, in the staff room, or in the parent-teacher relationship.

No single constituency or process, or activity, or person is responsible for success, mediocrity or failure. A school is a system, not a machine, and cannot be understood by examining the parts.

A mechanistic approach to evaluating schools will focus on the surface 'evidence' - the results, activities, plans, schedules, management practices and so on that an external inspector can get their hands on. However, when a whole-systems perspective reveals these aspects of school life to be sensitively dependent on the culture that underpins them, it's clear that what's required is a way to access and explore the culture itself.

Culture is *experienced*, and an individual's experience of it is entirely subjective, based on the degree to which the culture fulfils their physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs. No inspector can judge the quality of the human experience, only the individuals themselves.

This combination of cultural context and subjective experience makes objective 'results-based' comparisons impossible. For example, one school might produce results which given its context, are miraculous, but may be unremarkable in another school, where entirely different indicators of success might be appropriate. However, most measurement processes flatten out differences like these, reducing complex human experiences to a series of boxes to be ticked, and concealing the diversity that's essential to the health of every living system. Quite literally, standardisation is the antithesis of life.

From a whole-systems perspective then, a meaningful whole school evaluation process would assess the deeper culture, not the surface practices. It would be based on the subjective experience of all the participants in the system, not the objective evaluation of external inspectors. It would capture the degree to which the full spectrum of human needs are met, not merely the intellectual. It would embrace diversity rather than kill it with standard notions of performance and quality. And of course, it would provide timely feedback, prompting the system to engage in its own improvement in response to information that is meaningful and relevant.

Evaluating Culture

Culture Mapping is a process that can do all of this quite easily. Based on Abraham Maslow's insights into the hierarchical nature of human needs, the process makes the *intangible* dimensions of culture tangible, by mapping the values at work in the human system.

This uncomplicated on-line process, with its user-friendly front-end, belies a sophisticated diagnostic model and powerful analysis that interprets qualitative experience in quantitative measures. In other words, it puts numbers on feelings, and gives everyone a voice, allowing teachers, students and parents to indicate what is important to them personally, and the degree to which their current experience of the school meets those needs. Crucially, the feedback also shows where and how each constituency feels their experience could be improved, and so the process becomes a clear agenda for change and a benchmark for future improvement.

There are other benefits too, in relation to the current debate. Culture Mapping would avoid the delays inherent in external bureaucracy, and provide relevant and timely feedback. It would allow school cultures to be compared, but on *qualitative* terms that are subjective to each school community, rather than solely on the basis of an arbitrary 'objective' standard. And of course, the process can be easily repeated at intervals to track improvement over time, allowing schools to demonstrate clearly the degree to which they have embraced change and improved the quality of everyone's experience.

Changing Culture Naturally

Whereas a mechanistic approach will require those in positions of authority to tick boxes confirming they've 'fixed' what needs fixing, the truth is that a ticked box doesn't guarantee that anything has substantially changed. A whole-systems approach, on the other

hand, allows the system to reflect on its own performance, and puts responsibility where it belongs - with everyone involved in the school system. It would give parents and students a different kind of voice, and help them to see their critical role in making the school what it is. And it would help principals and teachers become accountable not only for management, planning and so on, but for cultivating the cultural context in which learning happens.

The shift of perspective from machine to living system redefines the role of those in positions of leadership and influence from mechanic to gardener. No matter how skilled, a gardener cannot 'grow' a rose. The rose does its own growing in response to the conditions in its environment, while the gardener's task is to optimise the conditions in which the rose can flourish. In a human system such as a school, the leadership role is not about ticking boxes, but about calling forth human potential by cultivating the conditions in which people can learn and evolve.

And in the end, isn't that the deeper purpose of your vocation... and of education itself? ||| **dya**

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