



Excellent Schools: The Research Base

When we embarked upon our journey to create this service, we had deep conversations about what in our experience, and knowledge of the relevant literature, constituted an excellent school. Naturally, we agreed that an excellent school did not reflect the socio-economic status of its community or its size, although both of those things could be significant factors. Also, the notion of an excellent school is more than simply a generic term without substance - excellence can be defined and displayed, it can be demonstrated and recognised. Through a deep reading of the relevant literature, we have identified four key aspects of an excellent school.

Firstly, we have focussed on two elements of “high impact learning” which reflect the importance of learners achieving challenging learning opportunities and their application in authentic situations and environments, having the resilience to embrace the struggles that accompany such challenging learning experiences (Yaeger and Dweck, 2021) and working in collaborative classroom environments to do so. (Doll, 2014; see also EEF, 2021) Excellent schools aspire to create the highest quality learning opportunities that regularly extend learners’ growth based on a clear understanding of the extent of their abilities and where they need further extension or support. (Townsend, 2007; Curran, 2014) The teacher-learner relationship, and the processes that underpin the effectiveness of this relationship lay at the heart of the school’s intent. (Hopkins, 2022)

These schools have developed a culture among all members that not only promotes resilience and high expectations; but also fosters support and encouragement so that the achievements of the individual are appreciated and celebrated by all. School leaders have a key role to play within such environments by reinforcing the messages of high expectations, using a range of collaborative processes (Slater, 2004) that ensure that learning opportunities and environments remain high quality and model their own commitment to personal development and professional learning about core business. (Leithwood et al., 2004; Day et al., 2016)

Secondly, we understand the importance of schools being clear about quality in all its various dimensions. Excellent schools can describe what high quality schooling and education look like and aspire to meet this standard. A definitive sense of quality is related to the running of the whole school organisation; the key elements of professional relationships and practice; and that of individual practitioners. (Hopkins, 2007) Further, the school is clear about how these elements interact to underpin quality in learning outcomes. The school and its members refer to standards of practice and achievement and return to these regularly in ways that underpin feedback loops. (Stoll & Kools, 2017)

At the heart of a “focus on quality” is the continual reference to learning achievement standards, both qualitative and quantitative, that drive ongoing dialogue between teacher, students and their families as to what a student has achieved and what their further learning goals can be. All members understand and can articulate their learning goals and regularly engage in discussions about how to achieve and extend them. (Sturgis & Casey, 2018) School leaders have a key role to play in promoting aspiration to high standards, facilitating the various processes by which to reference quality standards and modelling the drive and energy to go beyond the standards set. (Sammons et al., 2014) Leaders collaboratively implement the processes to achieve and maintain achievement standards and evaluate their impact over time. (Bendikson & Meyer, 2022)

Thirdly, it is obvious that excellent schools are constantly looking outward and beyond to best understand the aspirations of their communities; (Groves & West-Burnham, 2007) appreciate the economic, social and technological forces that will impact on learners’ future skills; (Sheniger & Murray, 2017) create learning spaces based on evidence of best practice from comparable schools elsewhere; and implement strategic directions within a culture that fosters responsiveness and embraces change. (Kotter, 2011) A key aspect of

such a professional culture is a collaborative and progressively structured enquiry approach, whereby professionals work together (Marsh, 2012) in large or smaller groups (or individually within appropriate performance development processes) to define challenges of practice, agree on effective responses and apply these, monitor and evaluate positive impact to embed into ongoing practice. (Ingvarson, 2017)

Excellent schools employ such an orientation in a systematic way, while implementing strategic plans that are mindful of the importance of flexibility and responsiveness. This involves such approaches as setting clear goals and using data-driven decision-making but also being open to revising strategies as circumstances change. (James et al., 2008; Davies, 2011) Using such approaches, such schools increase their adaptability though not at the cost of losing focus on desired learner outcomes, foundational values or strategic intent. (Marsh & Farrell, 2015) School leaders have a key role to play in balancing the future orientation of exploration and responsiveness with that of maintaining rigorous processes that are embedded in practice though can still evolve over time. Such leaders can articulate an ambitious vision for the school while maintaining the rigor of the processes by which to achieve such a vision. (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017; Grissom & Condon, 2021) Excellent schools are constantly scanning the educational leadership landscape to establish high points of practice and approaches evident locally and/or internationally (Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins, 2020) and then adjusting such models to resonate with local circumstances.

At the heart of these three dimensions, and what serves to reinforce their positive connections to underpin excellence, is the **notion of complexity** (Morrison, 2002). Complexity theory reinforces that when organisations such as schools use simplistic approaches to poorly described issues with little sense of the interactions between variables and only a meagre attempt at ensuring a shared understanding or collective effort, then the educational outcomes for children and young people are limited at best. (Morrison, 2006) At the same time, it is important to reinforce that complexity theory does not serve as a contesting model of school excellence but a pragmatic lens through which the three areas of school excellence described above can be considered, understood and applied. (Snyder, 2013)

Thus excellent schools consider their work from the perspective of *strategic agility*, namely they understand the importance of looking for the relationships between contextual evidence, (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012) considering data in nuanced ways including trend and comparative analyses, and use complementary approaches to the use of quantitative and qualitative evidence. (Johnson and Christensen, 2024) At the same time, such schools understand the danger of simplistic, “cause and effect” responses to challenges or opportunities arising and seek for emergent forces and influences. They monitor actions to nimbly adjust actions over time as new information becomes available. They understand that targets and outcomes of actions need to be described in ways that acknowledge the complexity of the work being undertaken. (Eussen, 2022; Jefferson and Anderson, 2021). Members of excellent schools use critical and diversity frames to consider global, national and local events and arrive at conclusions that recognise the impact of various influences. They look beyond the scope of their own experiences to build a richer understanding of the world. (UNESCO, 2021)

The importance of a complexity lens also comes to the fore when school members apply *systems thinking* to their endeavours. (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2023) In so doing, they are considering challenges and opportunities within the school organisation in ways that acknowledge the influence of a range of elements and forces beyond the responsibility of any particular person. Thus, opportunities for improvement are understood as potential changes to structures and processes within the school and not through an onerous lens of accountability. School members understand that practices can evolve over time within a strategic environment that fosters innovation rather than through top-down approaches or implicit coercion (Fidan and Balchi, 2017).



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