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Enabling *Strategic TQM* within School Improvement Processes in Australian Public Primary Schools

Background

Schools today are expected to deliver and contribute actively into national prosperity and economy. Hill, Rowe, Holmes-Smith and Russell (1996, p.1) suggest that, "the provision of schooling is one of the most massive and ubiquitous undertakings of the modern state." Schooling is considered to be the main vehicle for bringing about active social change and improvement within society.

Australian schools have been operating as self-managed schools with a devolving model of school management since the eighties. Australian federal and state governments have continued to work in increasing their focus and effort towards enhancing school improvement and accountability processes that address educational issues. But the crisis that continues to exist in Australian education suggests that, "Making any more mistakes in the "How to" of delivering a quality education will be disastrous to the nation…" (Commonwealth Of Australia, 2008, p. 34).

At the state level, the Victorian Government has developed a transparency strategy based on the belief that everyone responsible for a young person's education needs a shared understanding of how children are progressing in their learning and how a school is performing (DEECD, 2009). Responsibilities are devolved to individual schools leading to increased school accountability. Most school leaders are required to work with staff and community to develop strategic plans with clear outcome targets and improvement strategies (McKenzie, Mulford, & Anderson, 2007). Amidst diverse models of school governance and school improvement frameworks, an under-researched area in the public education system, is the influence of business improvement models such as Total Quality Management (TQM) within schools.

Grumdahl (Grumdahl, 2010, p.144) describes TQM as, "a valuable tool for creating a culture of belonging for both staff and students, where the pursuit of excellence in learning applies to all." Militaru et al. (Militaru et al., 2013, p. 1139) suggest that,

> "TQM in education supposes a holistic approach out of which each of the following seven elements should not be missing: philosophy, vision, strategy, aptitudes, resources, rewards and organization. Each element has a function that must not be omitted."

Since the eighties TQM models have been applied to schools due to the strategic leadership approach and sustainable structure it provides for improving school management and developing school leadership capacity. Research literature supporting the use of quality models and programs within schools identifies its effects through curriculum reforms (Setiasih & Tjahjono, 2004), improvements in student learning (Kovacs, 2009), quality teaching (Taşar & Çelik, 2011), enhanced leadership capacity (Berry, 1997; Ngware et al., 2006), embedded strategic management approaches (Leach, 2010; Venkatraman, 2007) and continuous improvement elements (Svensson & Klefsjö, 2006). Research literature indicates that reasons for its failure are associated with a kind of imposition felt in the application of business improvement models within education and the industrial overtones that were

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found in earlier versions of TQM used in schools (Eagle & Brennan, 2007; Hodgkinson & Kelly, 2007, Idrus, 1995; Kwan, 1996, Walpole & Noeth, 2002). Today, while all Australian schools, use business models to manage schools, the idea that business improvement models can be used to improve not just the administrative function but also academic excellence within schools is broadly resisted and contested as being another neo-liberal strategy used to hamper 'real school improvement agendas'.

Purpose

This paper examines how business improvement models used within Australian schools enhance and support their educational excellence. After a wide search, two TQM models used in Australian public primary schools were found suitable for this study. These included the *Quality in Schools approach* used in the early part of the last decade and applied at the systems level within public schools across Victoria and South Australia (N=138) and the *ISO 9001 2008* approach that is still found operational today. Through case-study research, these applied TQM models are studied to determine their key enablers within school improvement processes. Findings from this study indicate that schools intending to use 'a quality approach' require a more proactive posture of *Strategic TQM* to engage actively in continuous school improvement (Fernandes, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

Bilich and Neto (Bilich & Neto, 1997) suggest that,

> "The adoption of *Strategic TQM* presupposes, on the part of the organization, a constant evaluation of its concepts of management and of its administrative practices through the adoption of innovative strategies, and, before anything else, a necessity that the organization develop a strategic culture." (p.88)

In describing the enabling influence of *Strategic TQM* within schools, Gore (Gore, 1993, p.335) maintains that, "The central concept of [Strategic] TQM, 'continuous improvement', is fundamental to educational institutions whose purpose is to support improvement and individual growth." Fernandes (Fernandes, 2013; 2016) has identified two central key factors within *Strategic TQM* in schools. These are *Quality Assurance* and *Quality Enhancement* which when applied successfully together lead schools in transforming themselves into *Strategically-Oriented Learning Organisations. Quality Assurance* is a cultural transformation within an educational organisation which incorporates goals with related processes that involve the development of a shared vision, a proactive leadership, an effective professional development program, provision of services that satisfy customer needs, and a continuous improvement process of review and evaluation. *Quality Enhancement* refers to the improvement of

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educational quality through cycles of continuous improvement and innovation (Hodgkinson & Kelly, 2007). Holness (Holness, 2001) identifies significant organisational improvements occur when a continuous improvement program is used with a meaningful quality assurance program; with positive results felt over time as a culture for quality is developed through stages of planning, executing and evaluating going on in continuous cycles. The philosophical basis of *Strategic TQM* enables schools to develop their own self-assessment processes leading them in the direction of continuously improving their *quality of education* as well as the *quality of the educational processes* used within the school to deliver 'quality education'.

Methods

Using a case-study research design, a mixed-methods approach was used to investigate the two case-study schools. Barton and Lazarsfeld (Barton & Lazarsfeld, 1955) suggest that one can use qualitative research for developing hypotheses and for the exploration of the phenomenon under study, which then is quantitatively tested. This study was designed as a retrospective, instrumental, organisational case-study using qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, content analysis, document analysis and semi-structured observations as well as one quantitative method that involved using a Self-Assessment Quality Checklist.

The study followed Hesse-Biber's (Hesse-Biber, 2010, pp. 71-72) *sequential exploratory mixed-method design* where the qualitative component was the primary research method used to generate theory or specific theoretical constructs. The relatively minor quantitative component was used specifically to test out the ideas generated from the major qualitative component. Hesse-Biber's (2010) model was adapted and used as a mixed-method design which began with exploratory qualitative in-depth interviews and semi-structured observational records; followed by a quantitative questionnaire audit – the *Self-Assessment Quality Checklist* as an intermediate step. The results from both steps were deepened and assessed in a second round of qualitative in-depth interviews and document analysis. Data-coding was conducted using the *Australian Business Excellence Framework* as a data-analysis tool. The results from the quantitative data was then used to further corroborate emerging research findings. Emerging key concepts constituted the foundation for theory-formulation and general conclusions that emerged from this study.

Evidence

The findings indicate that the business improvement models influence three main aspects of school: organisational culture; mechanisms of continuous improvement and school leadership. The organisational

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culture of these schools is dependent on their *Quality Assurance* systems maintained through targeted goal-setting, policies, processes and actions. The quality of these processes is monitored through their quality policy indicating their organisational intentions and directions. As one school member from case-study school two indicated,

> "The school's aim is about striving for excellence in all things. It has achieved this through the development of an effective Quality Management System with external accreditation."

Both schools have their own self-chartered *Quality Enhancement* systems which focuses on the improvement of educational quality through strong cultural cycles of continuous improvements and innovations. As suggested by a case-study school one member,

> "The development of school values was something that followed the *Quality in Schools* program. It has totally become the driving force in our school and in what we do. The Principal and the Quality team worked on it first and then we got feedback from all staff. We also conducted the same process with the students and got their opinions. Next, parent opinions were sought through a survey. We then worked at collating all that information which resulted in our five common values."

These schools demonstrate *Strategic TQM* within the leadership systems of their schools, through *Quality Assurance* mechanisms grounded in *Quality Enhancement* programs that involves various stakeholders within the school improvement process. As indicated by a case-study school one member,

> "As we keep growing and changing staff, the Welfare Coordinator tries to keep bringing these *Quality in Schools* tools in and keeps using them and giving us exposure to it. A lot of new people have come on-board so the original emphasis can be lost. Next year we will be looking at the *Quality in Schools* program again and will try to see how we can redefine it for ourselves at the new level that we're at."

As seen above, it is clear that quality assurance programs implemented within schools need to have a system that promotes quality enhancement through continuous improvement. The need for case-study school one to re-evaluate itself and the program gives strong indication of the need for continuous improvement mechanisms to exist whenever a school is using a quality assurance system for its self-improvement. In the words of their school principal,

> "The Triennial Review would have to be the most important thing that takes place in the school's process for continual improvement. Looking at current practice and reviewing the last three years and looking at our future direction which culminates in the next school charter is what helps us to keep moving ahead. The *Quality in Schools* program provided us with the required tools that helped us to involve everyone in this process, through a process of self-assessment and review, using a reflective enquiry approach."

Similarly with case-study school two, one member observes,

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> "The rationale for our plan was quite simple – staff and parents are vital stakeholders and, as such should have ownership of school improvement programs collectively. Discussions commenced by whole school staff members and School Council on ways in which our existing organisational management structure and procedures could be enhanced through this program; briefings were conducted on the merits of this Quality Management System by experts in the field; as a result, the development of our *ISO 9001: 2008* program was enshrined in our School Charter."

Involvement of stakeholders in policy-making, develops deeper awareness about the school's business environment in relation to its main activity – the teaching and learning of students. As another case-study school two member suggests,

> "One of the main benefits of the *ISO 9001: 2008* Quality Management System has been in working out how to involve everyone at the school. The principal has been very active in driving this involvement. He's been very much interested in getting the leadership team, the teaching and administration staff, the parents and the community involved in the process. The outcome has been a participative involvement by everyone in making this school work effectively."

Thus, *Strategic TQM* may support the development of a quality culture within Australian schools which over time works at transforming them into s*trategically-oriented learning organisations* where people, processes, and systems focus on continuous school improvement. One limitation is that, this change process of school culture is slow, requiring on-going commitment and involvement from school leadership.

Results and Conclusion

Schools using business improvement models may develop into strategically-oriented learning organisations with four factors enabling the *Strategic TQM* within them. These include: transformational and distributed leadership, collaborative teamwork, bundling strategies that diffuses and aligns all school improvements with the school's strategic vision and a deeper understanding of the school's contextual influences.

Scholarly Significance of the Study

This study contributes towards understanding how a *Strategic TQM* approach allows schools to cope with complex and dynamic phenomena associated with rapidly changing internal and external environments.

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