

A review of (elementary) school self-assessment processes: Ontario and beyond

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Abstract

This review draws attention to issues related to school self-assessment. This process has been similarly implemented in a variety of jurisdictions globally in the past decade hence their inclusion herein as an attempt to understand the school self-assessment process which has also been developed for use in local Ontario (Canadian) elementary schools. This review includes an examination of the foundational components of effective schools, the purpose of school self-assessment, and the successes and challenges of school self-assessment both locally and internationally.

Keywords: School, self assessment, self-evaluation

Introduction

School Self-Assessment (SSA) as a means to improve schools is an important tool and mode to move forward (McNamara, O'Hara, Lisi, & Davidsdottir, 2011). Conceptually school self-assessment is understood as a course of action undertaken by a school, "whereby carefully chosen participants describe and evaluate the functioning of the school in a systematic manner for the purposes of making decisions or undertaking initiatives in the context of ... overall school development" (Van Petegem, 2005, p. 104). Within an Ontario, (Canada) context, it has been similarly defined as a process carried out collaboratively by a school, in which chosen staff members systematically gather and analyze evidence to improve the schools

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performance (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat 2007, p. 11). SSA is an opportunity to advance and validate a school's development through systematic and strategic attention. SSA and school self-evaluation (SSE) are terms that will be used interchangeably henceforth in order to address six purposeful questions.

Purpose

Our purpose was to review and thereby address the following questions: (1) What is school self-assessment (SSA). (2) What are the foundations of SSA? (3) What are the most popular Models of SSA? (4) What is the purpose of SSA? (5) What are the components of SSA? (6) What are the successes and challenges of school SSA both locally and internationally?

Method

We performed a search of documented databases such as EbscoHost ERIC, Education Research Complete, Scholars Portal, Educational Administration Abstracts, and ProQuest. We further investigated copious numbers of education-focused peer-reviewed journals keying on SSA, including School Effectiveness and School Improvement, British Educational Research Journal, Oxford Review of Education and Learning Environment Research. Pertinent reviews of school self-assessment such as McNamara, O'Hara, Lisi, and Davidsdottir, 2011; Kyriakides, Creemers, Antoniou and Demetriou, 2010; Croxford, Grek and Shaik, 2009; Scheerens and Bosker, 1997; Marzano, 2003; Durrant, 2006, were utilized.

Background

The use of a school assessment instrument requires current educational policy-makers to acknowledge the merit and utility of this mode. To do so requires a change in fundamental beliefs and understanding of school evaluation per se. Durrant (2006) suggested we need to engage people to hear what they have to say, "... a 'pedagogy of voice', in which there is recognition of different participants and the distribution of resources such that they may participate equally. ... This is the foundation of organisational and systemic improvement" (p. 4). By bringing school community members together we enable discussion and infuse a new community of practice that may avoid past enterprise results which have failed to produce the desired changes and outcomes; in part because school leaders find it difficult to comprehend conventional data/feedback (Demie, 2003; McNamara, et al., 2011, p. 80). Researchers have finally heard practitioners who explained they were simply too busy day-to-day to grasp and implement research findings and performance data in schools (Ryan & Joong, 2005). Some of the barriers to implementation included a, "lack of time to read research publications and implement new ideas; lack of access to research publications; academic languages and statistical analysis that are not fully understandable; [and just a] lack of relevance of the research findings for practice" (Demie, 2003, p. 446). As a result researchers such as Fullan, Hill, and Crevola (2006) suggested political leaders "need to take an

unprecedented interest in public education in charting a new improvement mode for school systems” (p. 11). Consequently, accountability models in the last ten years have gradually changed, shifting focus to measured student achievement as the primary basis for determining a school’s effectiveness (Lezotte, 2005). In addition “research ... has demonstrated that social background factors such as gender, ethnic background, fluency in English, free school meals and mobility rate can influence overall school levels of attainment” (Demie, 2003, p. 447). With many variables at play and within arguably diverse contexts locally, regionally and globally, it has been concluded that we need to employ self-assessment to capture the ‘pedagogy of voice’ and the contextual nuances unique to each school that be unnoticed using conventional indices such as test results (Kyriakides, Creemers, Antoniou & Demetriou, 2010, p. 820).

Within the past decade, research concerning the effectiveness of schools and publicly funded education has had a significant impact on the current Ontario Elementary school climate as “political influences, high-stakes testing, and budget restraints have placed added pressures on school systems and increased the demands for change” (Hulley & Dier, 2005 p. 1). With increased accountability locally and globally, an emerging emphasis on school self-assessment has become a primary focus of school improvement initiatives (Quist, 2003; Van Petegem, 2005). The drive for improvement in publicly funded schools has, in general, been initiated by policy makers at various levels of government usually from the top-down, mandate driven requirements that describe the outcomes schools are expected to produce (Lezotte, 2005 p. 9). As the accountability agenda has escalated, publicly reported high profile data about schools have become a stalwart of most large scale reform efforts (Croxford, Grek & Shaik, 2009; Earl, 2001).

Foundation: Components and Models

In an attempt to understand the school self-assessment process in Ontario’s Elementary schools, consideration must first be given to an examination of the foundational research of educational effectiveness both locally and internationally in order to answer our question: What are the foundations of SSA? It is necessary to acknowledge that the process of SSA has been informed by three decades of effective schools research, some of which has been reviewed via current meta-analyses conducted by Kyriakides, Creemers, Antoniou and Demetriou (2010). Effective schools research, conducted over a thirty year period has proven repeatedly that schools can, in fact, control enough variables to ensure that all students learn and function well in school (Hulley & Dier, 2005, p. 2).

What is an effective school? Lezotte (2002) defined an effective school “as a school that can, in measured student achievement terms, demonstrate the joint presence of quality and equity” (p. 21). Several researchers have attempted to categorize the critical components of high achieving, effective schools, for the purpose of organizing research and replicating the success of

schools in educating all students, regardless of socioeconomic status or family background (Kyriakides, Creemers, Antoniou & Demetriou, 2010). Historically, the genesis of school assessment can be traced to Edmonds, who in 1982 provided the first found identification of ‘Characteristics of Effective Schools’. He suggested effective schools had the leadership of the principal who devoted substantial attention to the quality of instructing:

- A pervasive and broadly understood instructional focus;
- An orderly, safe climate conducive to learning and teaching
- Teacher behaviours that convey the expectation that all students are expected to obtain at least minimum mastery; and
- The use of measures of pupil achievement as the basis for program
- Evaluation. (p. 10)

Also essential is an acknowledgement of the Scheerens’ model of school effectiveness displayed in Table 1 which was developed based on a review of the instructional and school effectiveness research literature prior to 1997. Scheerens’ integrated model of school effectiveness included the following factors:

Table 1: The Scheerens’ Model

School Level

- Degree of achievement-oriented policy – Educational Leader Ship
- Consensus, cooperative planning of teachers
- Quality of school curricula in terms of content covered, and formal structure
- Orderly atmosphere – Evaluative potential

Classroom Level

- Time on Task (including homework) – Structure teaching
- Opportunity to learn – High expectations of pupils’ progress
- Reinforcement

(Scheerens, & Bosker, 1997, p. 45)

Following the work of Scheerens and Edmonds, Marzano’s (2003) text entitled, ‘What Works in Schools: Translating research into action’, presented an extensive synthesis of effective schools research. Marzano (2003) suggested, “thirty-five years of research provides remarkably clear guidance as to the steps schools can take to be highly effective in enhancing student achievement” (p. 11). Marzano then developed a categorization

scheme which closely resembles those of other contributors. Table 2 summarizes Marzano's Model.

Table 2: Factors Affecting Student Achievement

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Example</i>
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Guaranteed and viable curriculum ▪ Challenging goals and effective feedback ▪ Parent and community involvement ▪ Safe and orderly environment ▪ Collegiality and professionalism
Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Instructional strategies ▪ Classroom management ▪ Classroom curriculum design
Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Home atmosphere ▪ Learned intelligence and background knowledge ▪ Motivation

(Marzano, 2003, p. 10)

Although an examination of the foundational components of effective schools identifies variations across key models, what may be fundamentally significant is the evidence to support the concept that schools have the ability to affect improvement in student achievement. Marzano (2003) explains that “implicit in factors affecting student achievement is the notion that the school (as opposed to the district) is the proper focus for reform” (p. 10). Elementary schools have the capacity to impact student learning and achievement when the key factors identified, are present. This summation addresses the importance of school self-assessment as a conduit for the development of schools that are capable of enhancing student achievement. Scheerens and Bosker (1997) earlier argued that school self-evaluation is an important component of school effectiveness inquiry, as “a second promising applied area is the growing practice of school self-evaluation. Particularly when a pupil-monitoring system is part of overall school self-evaluation, there are interesting possibilities for analyzing school-level process-output associations” (p. 319). Scheerens and Bosker (1997) added,

there is a kind of circular dependence of school self-evaluation and answering effectiveness-oriented research questions. First, school self-evaluation instruments may be developed on the basis of school effectiveness knowledge base, by selecting those implicit and process variables that are expected to work. Next, the information gathered by means of school self-evaluation instruments based on this developmental rationale could be used to further this knowledge base, as a side-product of the practical use that is of primary importance. (p. 321)

Therefore, the viability of school self-assessment can be a legitimate process to foster the development of more effective schools.

School Self-Assessment: Purpose

School self-assessment is a catalyst for improvement planning and implementation. It is how schools get to know themselves better and identify the strategies that will leverage change and improvement (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2007). MacBeath and Swaffield (2005) agreed, pointing out, “school self-evaluation is by definition, something that schools do to themselves, by themselves and for themselves” (p. 239). In theory, self-assessment administered in a reflective, collaborative school setting is most effective in impacting school improvement. The ‘voice’ of those who teach with the school grows onto pedagogical conversations which rise from within the school.

The Ontario School Effectiveness Framework (SEF), which forms the basis for school self-assessment in Ontario schools, includes the following basic tenants of the school self-assessment process within the School Effectiveness Framework:

- Self-knowledge and self-efficiency are as important for schools as they are for individuals
- Reflective, self-critical schools are better schools for teachers and students (The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2008, p. 13).

Ideally, school self-assessment is a collaborative activity which encourages open, straightforward discussion about a school’s strengths, areas requiring improvement and next steps (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2007, p. 11). The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (2007) suggests that for school self-assessment to be successful, certain conditions must be in place:

- Clear communication throughout the process,
- Personal and professional support, where needed,
- Shared leadership so that appropriate stakeholders are involved in decision making, and
- Willingness of teaching staff to share ideas, to explore, to build commitment and to mentor one another. (The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2008, p. 12)

There appears to be a current international understanding of the purpose of elementary school self-assessment which recognizes that to be successful, school self-assessment needs to be a systematic regular process where practices are shared (‘voice’) by everyone in the school community (Croxford, et al., 2009; Quist, 2003). MacBeath (2008) clarifies the purpose of self-evaluation, which is to, keep a school “mobile ... [via] a continuing

process of reflection that becomes implicit in the way people think and talk about their work. It is a process in which teachers construct their own knowledge by surfacing tacitly held data about classroom life and exploring conditions conducive to learning” (p. 396).

Plowright (2007) added; “self-evaluation should be mainly initiated by the school, to collect systematic information about the schools functioning, to analyze and judge the information regarding the quality of the school’s education and to make recommendations” (p. 374). In most descriptions, school-self assessment is referred to as a process aimed at school improvement. However when self-assessment is described as a systematic process focused on improvement of measurable outcomes and an assessment of quality and/or product, this implies a dimension of accountability. In an attempt to understand the fundamental purpose of self-assessment, the influence of accountability is examined next.

School Self-Assessment (SSA): Accountability

A broad analysis of SSA should include a discussion of self-assessment as a measure of accountability and “must also address the tensions between external bureaucratic accountability and internal professional accountability” (MacBeath, 2008, p. 396). Current research suggests that like Ontario, most Western-European countries show similar trends emphasizing the responsibility of SSE for accountability in relationship with school improvement (Croxford, et al., 2009). We must be careful not to use SSA as window dressing for accountability purposes because, “internationally, there is increasing evidence of a shift from confrontational forms of school evaluation primarily concerned with external accountability toward internal systems more focused on capacity building for self-evaluation and professional development” (McNamara, et al., 2011, p. 64).

In a SEF developed for Ontario schools, the idea of school self-assessment as a measure of accountability is approached as a form of professional accountability. The Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (2007) states: “The framework will provide ways in which teachers and school and system administrators accept responsibility to hold themselves accountable for ensuring that research-based, effective strategies are consistently implemented across the province” (p. 4). The SEF document recognizes the world wide trend that focuses on accountability and suggests that too often; this refers to an accountability that is imposed from external resources. It is our perspective that Ontario educators wish to monitor their own effectiveness. Indeed, the ultimate form of accountability occurs when “professionals engage in self-assessment and are willing to take steps to bring about improvement” (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2007, p. 4). Reeves (2004) addresses the paradox of accountability acknowledging that, “more real accountability occurs when the teachers actively participate in the development, refinement, and reporting of accountability (p. 3).

An examination of the literature reveals a dichotomy of views about what accountability means (McNamara, et al., 2011, p. 63). For instance, Earl and Katz (2006) explain that “we believe that the essence of accountability is a deep and abiding commitment to making schools as good as they can be for all students” (p. 12). In furthering the discussion of SSA as a measure of accountability, Leithwood and Earl (2000) suggest,

although internal accountability is the responsibility of schools and school leaders, one of the most powerful influences on the nature of the work of a school leader is the context, created in part, by the educational policies under which they operate; in this case, the accountability-driven policy context. This policy context dominates all initiatives to increase accountability. (p. 16)

For the most part accountability measures reflect a combination of government imposed self-assessment frameworks that become the responsibility of the individual school community (McNamara, et al., 2011, p. 64). In the article, Quality Assurance and Evaluation (QAE) within Scotland: promoting self-evaluation within and beyond the country, Croxford, et al. (2009) address an inconsistency within self-evaluation.

At first sight, the term self-evaluation might give the impression of a bottom-up approach, and to suggest that teachers and school management teams are reflective practitioners thinking about their own practice. However, the reality of the Scottish system of self-evaluation is that it is a top-down system using prescribed indicators rather than self-chosen goals. (p. 186)

Also, a study in the Netherlands looked into the effects of initializing school self-evaluation for inspection purposes in Europe. The findings presented made a distinction between the two main roles regarding school evaluation: An internal one and an external one and was reported as follows:

The external function focuses on the safeguarding of the quality of standards of schools, and in most European countries a National Inspectorate of Education is responsible for this task. In this respect, the government (through the efforts of the Inspectorates) maintains strategic control over the goals of the education system, based upon standards, objectives, and criteria of success regarding the outcomes of a school. At the same time, the daily management practices remain the particular schools responsibility. The internal function is the responsibility of the schools themselves. They are supposed to determine, guarantee, and safeguard their quality and improve the teaching-learning process and their school performance. (The National Inspectorate of Education, 2006, p. 19)

School Self-Assessment: Contradiction

In practice, as noted herein, most education systems appear to be moving towards a combination of methods, involving a degree of external monitors of internal self-assessment mechanisms (McNamara & O’Hare, 2005). Although there is ample literature to support the differences between internal and external accountability, research suggests there can be complimentary benefits to both. For instance, Hofman, Dukstra and Adriann Hofman (2005) explain:

External accountability focuses on the maintenance of quality standards in schools; in the Netherlands, this function is executed by the National Inspectorate of Education. The internal function of accountability in the responsibility of schools themselves and this can be applied to determine, guarantee, and guard the (chosen) school goals, improve the teaching-learning process, and the quality of education provided by the school. In practice, the internal and external components of accountability depend on and influence each other. (p. 254)

The conclusion that external accountability seems to strengthen internal monitoring and increase the use of the self-evaluation system within schools (Hofman et al., 2005, p. 254), is noteworthy. Yet Hofman, et al. (2009) further studied the connection between organizational management and internal and external types of school accountability and concluded: “(a) external accountability seems to fortify the internal monitoring and use of evaluation systems within schools and (b) seems to promote the search for successes in failures within the schools’ educational practices” (p. 50). This contradictory view of self-assessment is also expressed in the work of Croxford, et al. (2009) whose research considers the “incongruity of a governance system that promotes self-evaluation, while at the same time requires adherence to external benchmarks and indicators” (p. 179). As well, Croxford et al. (2009) when describing the Scottish Model pointed out,

The current system of self-evaluation appears to be indented to change the culture and mindset of teachers. If teachers can be persuaded to internalize [sic] the goals of school improvement, and vision of quality that is defined by the quality indicators, and adopt these as norms for self-review of practice, and then the whole Scottish education system will be on a journey to excellence. After years of being pressured to comply with policies and targets imposed from above, reactions to yet another set of quality indicators and policy rhetoric may be characterized as mere compliance with the audit system, and greater emphasis on ‘ticking boxes’ than achieving educational objectives. (p. 186)

MacBeath (2008) puts forward some clarity within the discussion of internal and external accountability and speaks to the ensuing contradictions that continue to surface, suggesting internal accountability describes the conditions that precede and shape the responses of schools to pressure that originates in policies outside the organization. MacBeath concludes that with strong internal accountability schools are likely to be more responsive to external pressure for performance (p. 396). In a similar context, Stoll and Fink (as cited in McNamara and O’Hara, 2005), explain:

While opening mandated doors will certainly get people’s attention there is little evidence that it engenders commitment on the part of the people who have to implement the change – it is through opening as many internal doors as possible that authentic change occurs. (p. 270)

A review of the current research seems to suggest that internal accountability is more likely to affect authentic change in schools; external demands and the force of government policies appear to provide the impetus for initiating the process of self-assessment (McNamara, et al., 2011, p. 80).

Clarity of purpose when initiating the process of self-assessment seems to ensure an authentic experience. The process for school self-assessment in Ontario schools, as described in the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (2007) speaks to a process which is initiated by each school.

School Self-Assessment: International Lessons

Although, to date there has been no empirical evidence to support the implied relationship between the SEF self-assessment process and improved student achievement in Ontario Elementary Schools, there is, however, an abundance of related research coming out of the United Kingdom and several other countries who have implemented large scale educational reform movements. As the literature reveals, school self-evaluation has been on the educational agenda of most European countries for the past ten years. It is reasonable to assume that the development of the SEF tools for self-assessment in Ontario's schools reflects the lessons learned from similar initiatives implemented in a variety of International jurisdictions. Common to each educational reform movement is a defined process for school self-evaluation. MacBeath (2001) addresses the trend throughout Europe and the United Kingdom explaining how,

the school's own self evaluation provides the focus and centre piece for external review and in which initiative lies with the school leaders to place self-evaluation at the heart of school and classroom practice. As in Europe, in Asia, in Australia, in New Zealand, and in North America there has been a progressive move away from more traditional forms of quality assurance to more school-owned, school-driven form of evaluation and accountability. (p. 387)

MacBeath's (2008) longitudinal research in the implementation of school self-evaluation and external school review for the Hong Kong Education Development Bureau provides substantial evidence to support the process. In the Final Impact Study (MacBeath, 2008) identified the following achievements associated with the self-evaluation process:

- A deepening understanding and heightened confidence of school staff in relation to School Self-Evaluation (SSE) and External Self-Review (ESR),
- Classroom teaching becoming more engaging, learning-centred, and open and receptive to student voice,
- A welcome for the insights of ESR teams and setting of clear agendas for improvement following external review,
- The enhanced skills of External System Review teams in conducting review,
- Sharing of thinking and practice by teachers beyond the classroom in a whole school dialogue,
- A growing willingness to engage with evidence, to move from impressionistic evaluation of quality and performance to a

more systematic, rigorous and informed approach to assessing practice (p. 27).

MacBeath (2008) also identified the importance of effective leadership as part of the school self-assessment process. He states, “In many instances it was the leadership of the principal that distinguished schools in which self-evaluation and external review were seen more as an opportunity than a threat” (p. 390). MacBeath’s study further indicated that the role of the School Improvement Team was related to successful evaluation and revealed that, “most informed and positive of all were members of School Improvement Teams, a function of their close involvement in, and ownership of, the self-evaluation process” (p. 388). It is important to recognize that in Ontario’s SEF the role of the School Improvement Team is identified as playing a major role. The School Improvement Team (SIT) is responsible for reviewing priorities, determining the scope of the process (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2007, p. 13). The responsibility of The School Self-Assessment Process rests with the principal and the school improvement team in collaboration with the entire staff. MacBeath (2008) suggested,

the impact and quality of leadership was also manifest in the approach of School Improvement Teams (SITs), varying from largely ineffective to exemplary models of shared leadership. The Impact Study concluded that the efficacy and credibility of the (SITs) could be explained by a number of key factors:

- *Team membership includes a cross-section of staff with high credibility among their colleagues.*
- *There was scope to exercise initiative and creativity.*
- *There was a willingness and capability to ask hard questions and instill an ethos of accountability.*
- *There was teamwork which synergises the capacities of all its members.*
- *Initiative and ownership were displayed, which create confidence and shared leadership.*
- *Vision was evident as to what self-evaluation can achieve and how it can feed into learning and school improvement. (p. 26)*

The meaningful involvement of School Improvement Teams in the Self-Assessment process appears to be a key variable influencing its effectiveness. Similar research conducted in the Netherlands by Schildkamp, Visscher and Luyten, (2009) also speaks to the positive impact of self-evaluation. ZEBO (in Dutch the acronym stands for Self-Evaluation in Primary Schools), is a self-evaluation instrument for Dutch primary schools, which was developed on the basis of school effectiveness research findings and input of teachers and principals” (p. 70).

The results of Schildkamp et al. (2009) longitudinal study of the use and effects of ZEBO also provides insight into the impact of school self-assessment. Teachers and principals involved in the study reported that the

ZEBO use had a growing effect on consultation and school functioning and quality, professional development, achievement orientation, and the didactic methods used by teachers in the classroom” (p. 84). Schildkamp et al. (2009) presents several key insights that can inform and improve SEF in Ontario’s schools for instance:

Even when schools use the ZEBO output intensively, this may not lead directly to changes in student learning. Although this is the idea underlying self-evaluation instruments, it may not be that easy to accomplish (p. 85). ... For this reason, it may also be necessary to support schools in this respect, to let them gradually develop the skills to diagram, remediate and implement. (p. 86)

Many lessons can be learned from the experiences of The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) external expectation of schools in England. The research of Plowright (2007) reflects a significant change in Ofsted’s approach to school inspections. He states that, “however, compared with early inspection, there is now an increased focus on school self-evaluation as a contribution to the inspection process” (p. 374). The change in the Ofsted process was reflective of the poor experiences reported by many schools where the Ofsted inspection was primarily seen as being about accountability rather than development (Plowright, 2007, p. 23). As a result of the changes detailed in the document, *The Future of Inspection: A Consultation Paper* (as cited in Plowright, 2007), the increased focus on self-evaluation provides the potential for schools to take more responsibility for identifying and addressing their own development needs. Similarly in the *Framework for the Inspection of Schools in England from September 2005* (as cited in Plowright, 2007) makes it clear that inspection from 2005 onwards, will have a strong emphasis on school improvement through the use of the school’s own self-evaluation, including regular input from pupils, parents and other stakeholders, as the starting point for inspection and for the school’s internal planning and development (p. 390). McNamara and O’Harra (2005) illuminate similar research carried out in Ireland which reflects the increased emphasis being placed on school self-evaluation and argues that it does constitute the best way forward (p. 267). The department of Education and Science in Ireland (DES) has seen a “clear shift in official policy on school evaluation towards a greater emphasis on internally driven self-review as the desired method of achieving the goals both of improvement and accountability” (p. 268).

The Irish (DES) published *Looking at Our Schools, and Aid to Self-Evaluation Schools* in 2003. Similar to Ontario’s (SEF) framework, schools in Ireland are expected to engage in process of collecting and analyzing information and on this evidence recommendation statements will be made. McNamara and O’Hara (2005) acknowledge that the process of evidence collection provides limited data on which to base empirical judgments suggesting,

This sounds impressive until one realized firstly that these bland assertions ignore the fact that very little data (of either quantitative or qualitative nature)

are available about any facet of the operation of schools in Ireland, and secondly, no attempt is made to suggest who should collect and analyze this information or how they should go about it. (p.276)

The Local Context: Ontario, Canada

The current educational climate in the province of Ontario was initiated by the election of Dalton McGuinty as the Premier of Ontario. Following his election in 2003, the education platform of the provincial government became and remains a primary focus. The focus established by the Minister of Education, the Honourable Gerard Kennedy in 2003, was on a more collaborative-relationship among the stakeholders within the education system. This approach continues to anchor the government's existing goals. Kennedy suggested a relationship that would focus on the new three "R's", Respect, Responsibility, and Results. "There should be common respect, mutual responsibility-taking, and results: in other words, a real partnership" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). Kennedy introduced an era of results focused accountability that continues to be at the forefront in 2009. In a paper published to support the government's second mandate titled *Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education* (2008), Ontario Premier McGuinty presents the government's plan to continue working together with their partners to build and energize Ontario's schools. Three core priorities have been identified:

(1) High levels of student achievement.

- Going deeper and wider on literacy and numeracy, including reaching the targets of 75 percent of students achieving at the provincial standard in Grade 6.

(2) Reduced gaps in student achievement.

- Reducing the gap in achievement for those groups of students who, for whatever reason, need extra help.

(3) Increased public confidence in publicly funded education.

- Fostering greater two-way engagement with the public to inform the implementation of the mandate and to foster public confidence.
- Strengthening the role of schools as the heart of communities.
- Recognizing the pivotal role of schools in developing the work force and citizens of tomorrow. (p. 14)

Policy makers in Ontario suggested that education leaders have a professional and pedagogical responsibility to focus on what it takes to implement the core priorities as outlined above. Educational leaders are accountable to the administrative hierarchy within the Ontario Ministry of Education, to fulfill the government's mandate within a culture of shared ownership and responsibility for student outcomes. The current provincial government suggests that it is the shared responsibility of all stakeholders

to ensure that all children are well served by our publicly funded education system. There is an obvious sense of urgency in Ontario schools, to improve achievement for all students.

Reflective of the momentum initiated by the Premier's education platform for measurable improvement in Ontario schools, the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat was established in November 2004 to support boards in improving student achievement. In an effort to support this mandate, the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat developed The SEF to assist boards and schools in sustaining a culture of continuous school improvement. *The SEF: A Collegial Process for Continued Growth in the Effectiveness of Ontario Elementary School* was developed to guide school and board analysis and improvement planning (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2007). See Appendix A for more information. The SEF, as a tool for self-assessment, identifies *Essential Components*, factors that have been identified to have an impact on student achievement and supporting indicators to assist schools in identifying areas of strength and areas requiring further development. The SEF indicates that at the heart of self-assessment, there are three basic questions:

- How effective are we in achieving our student learning and achievement goals?
- What is the evidence?
- What actions will we take to ensure continuous improvement?

The School Self-Assessment Process, (Appendix B), outlines the school-based analysis process developed for use in Ontario schools. The process outlines five distinct phases where the expectation is that schools review The Essential Components within the cycle (Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2007, p. 10).

This discussion emanates from one author who has acted as the School Effectiveness Principal Lead in an Ontario Board of Education, who has been responsible for the managerial tasks around organization, administration, and implementation of The School Effectiveness Framework and The School Self-Assessment Process in the board. The other author has examined, reviewed and written extensively about school development, assessment and growth. We believe the implementation of the SEF Framework and school self-assessment process is intended to provide a structure and process for ensuring that students in Ontario are taught by highly skilled educators implementing the best practices supported by research. Establishing a common understanding of what makes schools 'effective' provides the basis for reflection and identifies the primary interest for this literature review.

Conclusion

An attempt to understand the School Self-Assessment process via Ontario Schools was undertaken by reporting upon the theory and practice rooted in

thirty years of international effective schools research. We endeavored to explain, what School Self-Assessment (SSA) is, by illumination of the foundations of SSA. We examined the most popular 'Models' of SSA and addressed their purposes briefly. We also detailed the components of SSA and some of the successes and challenges of SSA, both locally and internationally. In doing so, the recognized contributions to effective schools research has identified key factors, components and correlates that provide the foundational structure for schools that are deemed highly effective in enhancing student achievement. Significant to the findings was the fundamental belief that all schools can control enough variables to ensure that all students learn and function well in school.

The SSA process, when considered in the effective schools context, becomes a companion in the development of increasing the effectiveness of schools. When self-assessment is understood to be an opportunity to explore a school's progress and practice related to student achievement, it has the potential to become an effective tool for impacting focused change (McNamara, et al., 2011, p. 80). The international literature reviewed, appears to support Ontario's view of self-assessment, a grassroots, school-based initiative, as more effective than externally imposed processes of self-evaluation which have been the common practice in the international context. If the purpose of SSA in Ontario schools is formative, where the primary focus is on the process of collaboration with students, staff and parents to identify the specific goals related to areas that requiring improvement in an individual school, then research would suggest that we are moving forward in the right direction. Schmoker (1996) suggested that,

without a common set of goals, schools will not be able to sustain their efforts, hope will dwindle, and low expectations may set in. With it, the entire school community can work as one. Collaboration will not happen, however, if goals are too numerous, superficial, or unmeasurable. (p. 105)

The continued focus on increased levels of accountability requires that schools and stakeholders become better versed in articulating the individual needs of their learners. The SSA process, as a measure of school improvement, may assist in providing schools with an informed focus for improving student learning. That being said, strong empirical evidence on the effects of school self-assessment is still lacking. Trying to demonstrate a causal link between self-assessment and improved student achievement is too simplistic we believe. Self-assessment is not a prescription of what schools can do to get better; it is simply a tool for critical analysis that is useful in the right setting. We must be cautious in moving forward to ensure that the purpose of self-assessment is clearly understood. Assuming that all schools have developed a collaborative culture where purposeful, supportive peer interaction is the norm may be unrealistic and naïve.

Next Steps

A necessary key question needs to be asked: Can the process of SSA act as a catalyst for school improvement and enhance student achievement scores?

Or, is the process being used and manipulated by the accountability movement? As we enter the third year of implementation in Ontario, it wouldn't be out of the ordinary to explore how well schools and school teams are developing their skills and knowledge around the self-assessment process, as a result of the 'The School Effectiveness Framework' and 'Self-Assessment Process' in Ontario schools. We are left to wonder, what impact will the implementation of the SEF and self-assessment process have on the Ontario School Improvement Planning process?



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Appendix A

FIGURE 1
The School Effectiveness Framework:
A Collegial Process for Continued Growth in the
Effectiveness of Ontario Elementary Schools

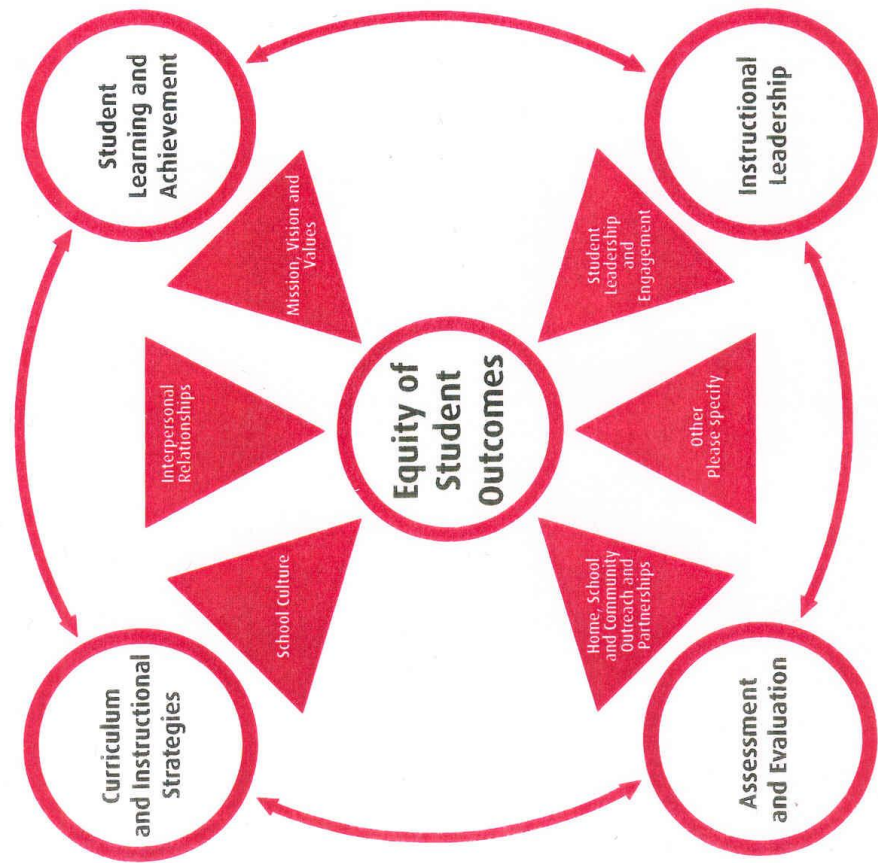


Figure 1 illustrates the framework and its components and how they contribute to equity of student outcomes. Keep in mind that the framework has been designed with two key uses in mind:

1. The School Self-Assessment Process
2. The District Review Process

The expectation is that districts and schools will review all of the Essential Components in a given cycle. In order to facilitate individualization and choice, districts and schools may select additional components as required from the list of the Components for Local Selection.

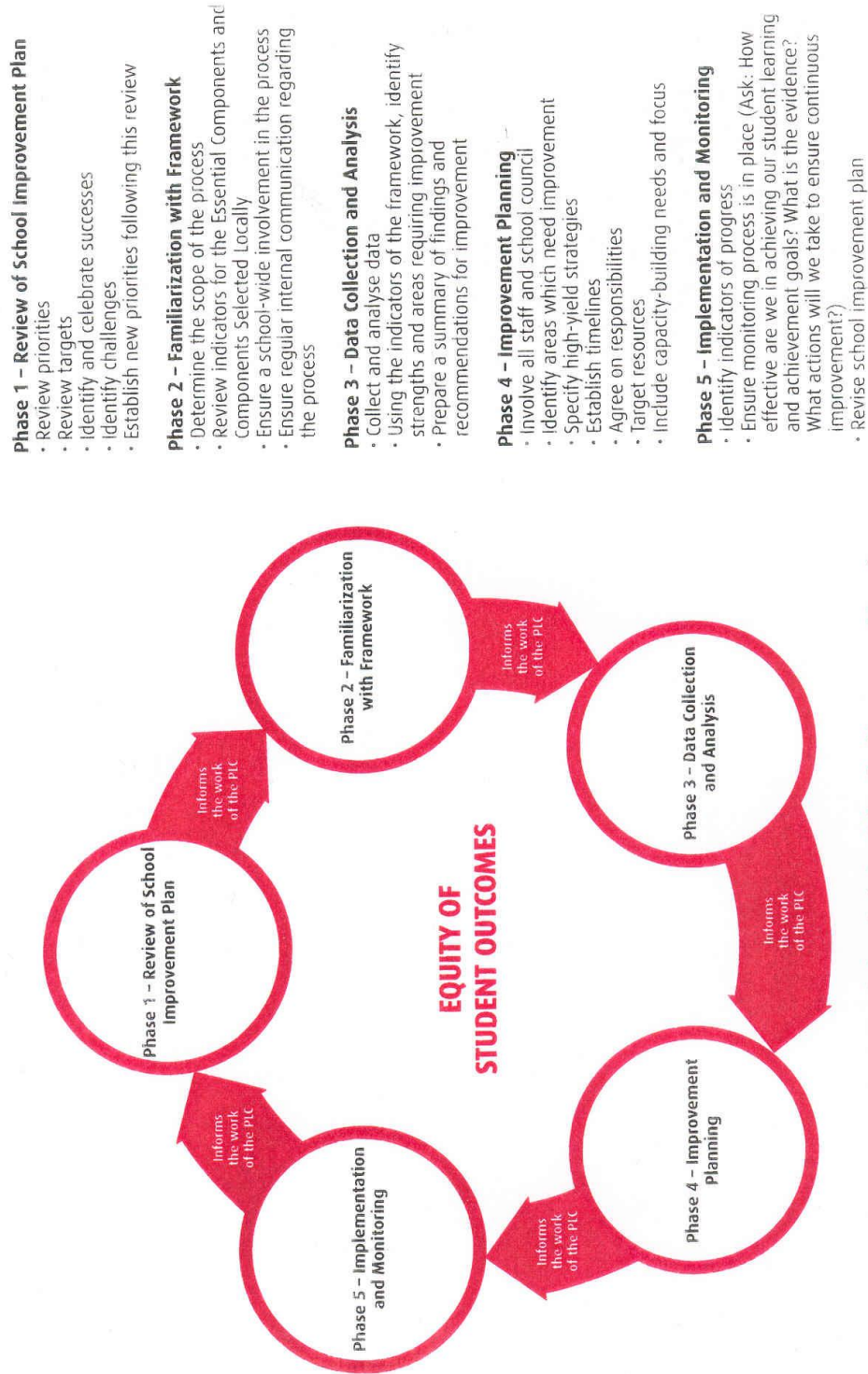
The School Self-Assessment Process involves all staff in every elementary school, is a cyclical process and should take no longer than three months.

The District Review Process is also cyclical and should take no more than four weeks allowing for a number of cycles in the year. Data gathered from this process will inform board priority setting and budget processes.

Appendix B

The School Self-Assessment Process

FIGURE 2



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