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**Four ways to avoid the “gap trap”:** Linking the ideal with the reality in school improvement.

# Four ways to avoid the “gap trap”:

Linking the ideal with the reality in school improvement.



**Sharon Hogan**

Sharon is the Principal Consultant & Managing Director of Sentio Education Services

## Introduction

A gap between great plans and actual practice often appears in many organisations. On the surface, or on paper, plans for improvement may be inspiring, clear and reflect the needs of the organisation. However, many organisational leaders acknowledge the challenges of implementing worthy plans. There may be little traction or infiltration of key priorities into the daily practices of the organisation. Many organisations struggle to improve their core business, often due to the lack of targeted strategies with the explicit purpose of bridging the gap between the ideal and reality. This paper explores this gap in reference to the core business of schools; student learning and engagement.

### This scenario may sound familiar:

*The school leadership team together with a strong group of representatives from the school community meet throughout the year. They review evidence, assess current strengths and areas needing attention to build a school improvement plan. Future goals are captured in the school strategic plan which includes a number of important school priorities related to the enhancement of student achievement and engagement. The plan is communicated to the entire school community at several meetings conducted across faculties and sub-schools. One key element of the strategic plan focuses on the school wide implementation of a specific pedagogical framework. The school invests time and money to provide comprehensive professional development for teachers. Two years later the school leadership team conducts an audit and discovers that most teachers have either not integrated this framework into curriculum or teachers are mostly unaware of the strategic plan. As a result, there has been little improvement in student learning and engagement.*

**The teachers I meet are passionate about their work and committed to enhancing student learning. However, many describe how they feel disempowered or stuck in a frenzied cycle of lesson delivery and assessment with little time for reflection and professional growth.**

School communities, like other organisations, often become caught in the “gap trap”. While many strategic plans include statements about the enhancement of student learning outcomes, cracks frequently appear between goals and reality. Gaps can develop between the school leaders’ and teachers’ mutual desire for improvement in instructional approaches, actual classroom practice and student learning outcomes.

### Reflecting on my recent consultation work in schools.

My consultation with school leaders and teachers suggests that in the busy and challenging environment of schools, all members of the school community can become caught in the “gap trap”; the gap between the shared desire for quality teaching, enhanced student learning and the opportunity for meaningful engagement in the renewal of professional practice. The teachers I meet are passionate about their work and committed to enhancing student learning. However, many describe how they feel disempowered or stuck in a frenzied cycle of lesson delivery and assessment with little time for reflection and professional growth. More recently, I have noticed a number of teachers lack knowledge of, or investment in, the school’s strategic plan. Several teachers have informed me, in confidence, how they are overwhelmed by the pace of change, unclear about the school’s pedagogical priorities and of their reticence to engage in “top-down” generated change agendas.

Through critical reflection, analysis of data collected in schools and scanning research in the fields of school improvement and teacher learning and development, it is possible to identify how the “gap trap” may manifest.

Increasingly, my consulting work in schools has forced me to question why this gap between the ideal and the reality is occurring and in some instances is widening. Through critical reflection, analysis of data collected in schools and scanning research in the fields of school improvement and teacher learning and development, it is possible to identify how the “gap trap” may manifest. Several factors may widen the gap including: a lack of follow through, reinforcement strategies, modelling or dialogue. There may be an absence of time or resources to support implementation. The strategic plan or pedagogical framework may not support diversity. The plan may not allow enough flexibility or acknowledge that every class is different, every student unique and that what works in one year level or discipline area may not work in another. The well documented plan may outline the “what” but not address the “how”. The strategies needed to bridge the gap between worthy aspirations and effective teaching practices are missing.

In this paper, I argue that school leaders can support teachers to bridge the gap between the vision for enhanced student learning and the reality by focussing on:

- how teachers learn and develop their professional practice over time
- building a positive learning culture for all members of the school community
- engaging teachers in inquiry based cycles of review
- finding time for informed and challenging professional dialogue.

## **Is the implementation of teacher performance management systems the answer to the “gap trap”?**

Gaps in alignment and cohesion between planning and practice in schools is hardly new. School leaders continually experiment with new ways to encourage staff to embrace change and enact relevant goals from the strategic plan. Recently, school leaders have perceived teacher performance management systems as one solution to addressing the gap between the ideal and the real.

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There is no doubt that school leaders need some way of monitoring teacher quality, growth in professional practice and impacts on student learning. Arguably, it is questionable if performance management processes alone can alleviate the “gap trap”. Some school leaders have attempted to close the misalignment between big picture plans, focussed on enhancing student learning, and the daily work of teachers through performance management systems. This focus on enhancing teacher quality has been driven by a range of policy, funding and government initiatives introduced throughout Australia (AITSL, 2012; Dinham, Invargson & Kleinhenz, 2008; Dinham, 2013). In Queensland, for example, the Newman government recently introduced the “Great teacher= great results” policy and funding. This policy encourages schools to introduce appraisal strategies that lift teacher performance and student results. These government initiatives have increased the pressure on school leaders to consider how they monitor and measure teacher performance and student learning outcomes.

In response to policy directions, schools throughout Australia have introduced a range of teacher appraisal strategies. In many schools this has resulted in the implementation of annual performance review meetings with line managers. Teachers are typically required to reflect on the impact of their current practice, identify goals and to align their professional action plan with the school strategic plan. In some schools teachers are assessed annually on their progress against key performance indicators. Yet, many teachers perceive performance management strategies as a “tick and flick” exercise. They complete the required templates, identify goals and then file this paperwork until it is time to go through the exercise again.

This view of performance management is reflected in the findings of the Teaching and Learning International Survey (OECD) conducted in 2013. The Australian participants in the survey included 2059 lower secondary teachers and 116 principals from 123 schools.

The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) collects internationally comparable data on the learning environment and the working conditions of teachers in schools across the world with the aim to provide valid, timely and comparable information from the perspective of practitioners in schools, to help countries review and define policies for developing a high-quality teaching profession. The 2013 survey reported that 62% of teachers in Australia were sceptical about performance management approaches currently adopted in schools. Teachers engaging with this survey saw performance management strategies in schools as fulfilling bureaucratic requirements rather than assisting in the enhancement of learning and teaching. Below is an excerpt from the 2013 report:

*Nearly all teachers in Australia (97%) report being formally appraised, and many report that their schools appoint a mentor (54%), establish a development plan (50%) or discuss measures to remedy weaknesses and help them improve their teaching (63%). However, nearly half of all teachers in Australia (43%) report that the appraisal and feedback systems in their school have had little or no impact on the way teachers teach in the classroom. The majority (62%) believe that appraisal and feedback is primarily an administrative exercise, and this has a detrimental effect on their job satisfaction. More than two-thirds (71%) of teachers in Australia agree that feedback provided to teachers is not based on a thorough assessment of their teaching, and a similar proportion (69%) do not believe that the best-performing teachers at their school receive the greatest recognition.*

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It is unclear if traditional, corporate, approaches to performance management are effective in educational settings or enhance the core business of schools; learning and teaching. Human resources in educational settings are structured in a different way. For instance, schools are predominantly staffed by professionals. In this flatter organisational structure there is less hierarchy and opportunity for delegation. Teachers are expected to work with a high degree of accountability and autonomy as they fulfil the complex demands of classroom teaching. Unlike assembling a well-designed mass produced car, there is no predefined template for quality teaching. Some may argue that the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL, 2012) provides the blueprint. However, teachers are required to apply their professional judgement as to how they interpret and apply these standards in their unique teaching context. What works with one student in one classroom may not work for the same student in the next. The variables of teaching are too great. The conditions are continually changing. Teachers must be adept at communication, improvisation, negotiation and persuasion with multiple individuals at any one time. It is the complexity of teaching that requires unique approaches to teacher development and the selection of strategies that address the gap between the ideal and the reality.

I recently conducted structured interviews with teachers exploring the gap and more specifically their perspectives on ways to enhance their performance. When these teachers were asked what would make a difference to their teaching they often requested alternatives to traditional approaches to performance management. They requested more opportunities for collegial collaboration, for non-scaled but structured observation, the opportunity to invite feedback that would be useful to them. Many teachers were wary of the word "performance" and its connotations of underperformance and evaluation based on seemingly unfathomable criteria.

Research is increasingly indicating that "top-down" approaches to performance management often neglect to: engage with teacher beliefs, focus on evidence, include professional learning, support collaboration or result in enhanced student learning outcomes (Fitzgerald, Youngs & Grootenboer, 2003; Timperley, 2011). One study conducted in New Zealand examined the effects of performance and appraisal processes introduced into New Zealand schools in 1997. Based on mandated government designed performance management procedures, middle level leaders completed annual formal reviews and performance reports on teachers within their department. The researchers found this bureaucratic model "untenable for developing and sustaining a healthy school climate, and specifically for the appraisal of teachers.

Instead, the researchers commented that teachers who are reflective practitioners “thrive on collaboration, knowledge sharing, collegiality, freedom, self-efficacy, professional practice and democracy” (Fitzgerald et al., 2003, p. 95). The same researchers highlighted that the ideals of top-down or overly bureaucratic systems of teacher appraisal focus on “individualism, competition, rewards and sanctions, secrecy, compliance, accountability and procedures” (Fitzgerald et al., 2003, p. 95). These ideals are often the antithesis of highly supportive collegial cultures necessary for the enhancement of student learning recommended by a range of key thinkers in education such as Bill Rogers (2006), Kenneth Leithwood and Brenda Beatty (2008). Similarly, leading educational author and researcher, Professor Emeritus Michael Fullan (2014), urges school principals to select the right drivers for change including: capacity building, collaborative effort, cohesive strategies and a focus on pedagogy.

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Introducing school improvement strategies, devising strategic plans, telling teachers how to improve or continually measuring performance are not entirely effective ways of addressing the “gap trap”. Perhaps this is not surprising when we consider established contemporary theories of learning that emphasise how new knowledge is socially constructed through dialogue and collaboration. For classroom teachers, in particular, the translation of ideas or new approaches into their professional practice is made even harder by ingrained beliefs about teaching and learning.

### How might school leaders guide their school community and avoid the “gap trap”?

When a pothole appears in the road our natural instinct is to avoid it, drive over if it appears relatively small, skirt around it or find another road. However, we should consider what happens to potholes when they go unrepaired. They inevitably get bigger. This analogy may also be applied to the gaps that appear in the implementation of pedagogical enhancement in school settings. Rather than driving over or around, it may be more productive to stop and take a good hard look at the gap between the intended and the enacted learning and teaching activities in schools. School leaders need time, support and strategies to identify the pieces of debris or obstacles that have become wedged in the gap. In other words, in order to repair the gap, school leaders need to know what is causing it.

### Studying the “gap”

The professional practice of teachers is influenced by a range of factors. It is not possible to explore all of these within this paper, however one often overlooked consideration in the implementation of change in school settings is the influence of teacher beliefs. As Levin and He succinctly state:

*We have known for at least two decades that teachers' beliefs drive the pedagogical decisions about teaching and learning of both novice and experienced teachers and that their practices in turn influence the opportunities that students have to learn (2008.p.67).*

The introduction of change agendas in school settings should occur in tandem with the study of teacher beliefs and the development of their adaptive expertise and confidence.

Central to the implementation of change and new initiatives in school settings is building an understanding of the nature of teacher beliefs about learning and teaching. These beliefs may include their views on: the nature of learning, expectations of students, discipline knowledge, ability to consider evidence and confidence to adapt their teaching. Therefore, the introduction of change agendas in school settings should occur in tandem with the study of teacher beliefs and the development of their adaptive expertise and confidence.

## Addressing the gap

School leaders may bridge the gap between the school vision for enhanced student learning and action by exploring teachers beliefs.

In this orientation to school improvement, school leaders investigate teacher perceptions and current beliefs about learning to reengage them in meaningful and sustainable ways.

In this approach, School leaders employ ways of consulting widely with teachers and gathering information about existing beliefs. If school leaders are unaware of how teachers think and their reasons for not adopting change then it is difficult to identify viable solutions. In this orientation to school improvement, school leaders investigate teacher perceptions and current beliefs about learning to reengage them in meaningful and sustainable ways. Effective approaches to school improvement may include: school wide consultation, shared discussion and decision making and frequent opportunities for teachers to discuss pedagogy. In this model, teacher beliefs, professional learning and effective change implementation are interdependent.

The gap between the ideal and reality may be reduced through effective collaboration and inquiry. Repeatedly, research indicates that ongoing, embedded and directly applied professional learning within cycles of teacher inquiry makes a difference to student learning (Robertson & Timperley, 2011; Timperley, 2008; Timperley et al., 2008). Teacher beliefs may be challenged through the sustained use of evidence, inquiry and action. This view is supported by another significant New Zealand study exploring how student learning outcomes in literacy were enhanced. The study found that the marrying of teacher professional learning with enhanced skills in reviewing evidence about student learning outcomes played a key role improving achievement and teaching practices (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2008). However, it is what teachers did with the evidence that was most significant in enhancing student learning. Teachers engaged in rich professional analysis and dialogue in relation to the samples of student work. Over time the diagnostic skills and discipline knowledge of the teacher developed, enabling teachers to identify their own professional learning needs (Timperley, 2011). This study found that the one-off professional development session can be useful only if it is directly linked to an identified professional need. Therefore, professional learning in schools is driven more by student learning needs and the teacher's "need to know" rather than a top down "need to tell" approach. These significant findings support claims that it is when teachers engage in cycles of learning and inquiry as opposed to cycles of performance measurement that the most positive student results have been achieved (Robertson & Timperley, 2011). Often these cycles of inquiry are more effective when they involve collaboration (Jensen & Reichl, 2011) with peers or occur in professional learning teams (Fullan, 2014; Stoll, 2011).

## In Summary

There are a number of ways that school leaders may avoid the "gap trap". This section outlines four approaches that school leaders may consider:

- 1. Adopting a new perspective:** School leaders begin by examining their current views of teacher learning and development. Effective school leaders adopt a growth mind frame and invest in strategies that support the development of teachers' adaptive expertise. To truly foster professional growth and school improvement, school leaders develop a deeper understanding of teacher development and learning. To avoid the "gap trap", school leaders embrace the view that teaching practice continually evolves over time as adaptive expertise builds. Leading teacher educator, Professor John Loughran encapsulates this perspective when he states that:

*If quality teaching is understood as continually building knowledge, skills and ability in the complex work of diagnosing and appropriately responding to diverse learning needs, then expert teachers are those that are able to put that learning into practice in different subjects, with multiple learners, in the same space and at the same time. (The Conversation, 2014)*

Through focussing on the development of teachers' adaptive expertise rather than predominately concentrating on measuring performance, school leaders may reduce the gap between the ideal and reality.

2. **Investing in meaningful consultation:** Leaders take time to study the gap through authentic consultation processes. School leaders seek to understand teacher beliefs about teaching and learning. This assists school leaders to identify what current or potential barriers may form a gap. School leaders include processes and strategies that enable teachers to engage with future plans and empower teachers to action them. School leaders provide sufficient time and resources for teachers to discuss and shape future classroom practice.
3. **Building a learning culture and opportunities for collegial support:** Performance management approaches avoid a deficit view of teacher capacities that strip away personal accountability, intrinsic motivation or investment in implementing change in classrooms. For teachers to meaningfully and honestly identify their strengths and areas for improvement they need to feel supported. Therefore trust and a positive school wide learning culture underpin effective professional reflection. This strategy requires a different approach to professional conversations. Executive and middle leaders acquire or hone their existing skills to effectively facilitate and lead productive professional learning conversations. Teachers have opportunities for rich and meaningful conversations about pedagogy and time for collaboration with colleagues. Peers assist each other to engage in deeper levels of critical reflection based on existing evidence of student learning. School leaders develop holistic structures and systems that support professional growth. Annual review processes meld with professional learning opportunities. This approach is based on respect for teacher professionalism and teacher driven accountability.
4. **Outlining the “what” and the “how”** Strategic plans include details or a map identifying strategies for follow through, collaborative reinforcement, modelling and dialogue. Time or resources are provided to support implementation. The strategic plan or pedagogical framework supports diversity, flexibility and acknowledges that every class is different, every student unique and that what works in one year level or discipline area may not work in another. The strategic plan outlines the “what” and “how”.

Written By Sharon Hogan,  
Principal Consultant and Managing Director of Sentio Education

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