



Leading improvement in your school

Pamela Macklin, Managing Director of Zbar Consulting, leadership coach;
Vic Zbar, Director of Zbar Consulting, Writer

Readers of our books may be familiar with an apocryphal story we tell in workshops we run concerning an English scientist who was asked to give a keynote address to an audience of non-English speakers on his detailed and complex research. Since he intended to speak for an hour to an audience who did not all necessarily speak English, he arranged to meet with his interpreter to work out when he should break. The interpreter, who also was a trained scientist, suggested he speak for 15 minutes and then he would translate, a further 15 minutes, and so on until the hour was up. While unsure about the efficacy of the approach, the scientist bowed to the interpreter's expertise and agreed.

The following day, after he was introduced and spoke for the first 15 minutes, the interpreter uttered what amounted to a single sentence before signalling the scientist to proceed. Another 15 minutes and a sentence, a third that yielded the same result and then the final 15

minutes and polite applause. Somewhat flabbergasted, the scientist sought out the interpreter after his address to find out what had just transpired. In response to his query about the unfolding speech, the interpreter explained that after the first 15 minutes he told the audience, "he hasn't said anything new yet". After the next 15 minutes he explained that "he still hasn't". After the third 15 minutes he advised them that "he isn't going to", and then at the conclusion of the speech he said "I told you so".

The point of the story is to illustrate that much of what this article contains is not necessarily new. There is nothing wrong with this, since the issue is not so much newness, as the implementation of strategies we know will work if schools are to improve. It might seem at times like stating the obvious but, as the management thinker Tom Peters is reputed to have said, "if the obvious was so obvious, then everyone would be doing it"; and of course, when it comes to whole-school improvement, they are not.

The challenge we face

While our schools educate a greater proportion of young people than ever before, and generate literacy levels that far exceed those of the so-called golden age of the 60s and 70s to which some would like to return, Australia's ranking in such international studies as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) are on the way down. The challenge this presents us is to make an already good system even better still, in particular by reducing the variability of performance within it which commonly relates to inequities in the system that exist. The good news in this context is that significant experience exists within Australia's schools to show that it can be done.

We know, for example, that some schools perform better than others with which they legitimately can be compared. Consider, for example, the outcomes for students in two anonymous neighbouring primary schools with an almost identical socio-economic mix as depicted in Figure 1. The figure shows the performance of a cohort of students who undertook the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) reading test in Year 3 in each school in 2015 and then again in Year 5 in 2017, compared with the performance of students in a group of statistically similar schools.

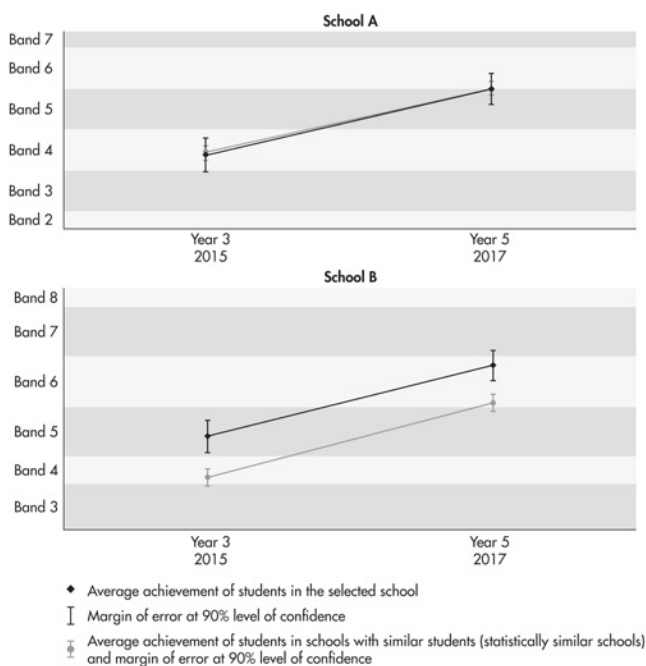


Figure 1: Performance of School A and School B compared to a group of statistically similar schools, 2015 to 2017.

(Note: The two components of the Figure are sourced from the MySchool website: <https://www.myschool.edu.au/>. More specific information cannot be provided as this would identify the schools. The Figure is taken from Macklin, P., & Zbar, V. (2020). *Driving School Improvement: Practical Strategies and Tools*, p.4 and is reproduced with the permission of the Australian Council for Educational Research).

Clearly school B is adding far more value than school A to its students' NAPLAN outcomes in reading, which is matched by its comparative performance in the persuasive writing, spelling and numeracy tests as well.

The challenge is to identify what schools like School B do, so that more schools can work like the best.

Just as some schools perform better than others, so too is there significant variability between teachers with the result that not all teachers have the same effect. As far back as 1996, Sanders and Rivers used extensive longitudinal studies into teacher effectiveness in the US state of Tennessee to show the difference that teachers make to students who essentially start at the same point.

As Figure 2 shows, an eight-year-old student at the 50th percentile in literacy performance who is placed with a low-performing teacher will, on average, by age 11 have dropped back to the 37th percentile. This should not necessarily be taken as a judgment of the teacher who could, for example, be relatively new to the profession or starved of professional development opportunities, but simply an acknowledgment of their current performance level which could, with the appropriate support, significantly improve. By contrast, the same student placed with a high-performing teacher on average will have progressed to the 90th percentile.

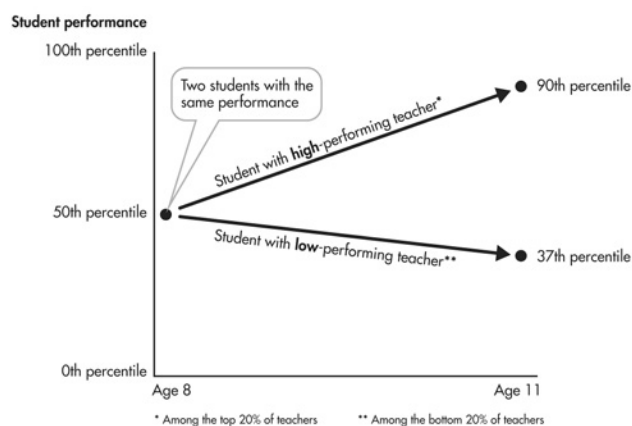


Figure 2: The difference teachers make

(The figure is created by the authors and is derived from the evidence in the text. There are many versions on the internet based on the evidence and this is one that the Centre for Strategic Education drew for the authors for an article they wrote for them. The Figure is taken from Macklin, P., & Zbar, V. (2020). *Driving School Improvement: Practical Strategies and Tools*, p.3 and is reproduced with the permission of the Australian Council for Educational Research).

The greatest source of improvement in any school comes from narrowing this gap by supporting more teachers to work like the best teachers in the school, with the result that consistently more effective teaching occurs in each and every class.

The stages of whole-school improvement

Schools do not operate context free. If they did, improvement would be a much easier task. Rather the school must analyse its current level of performance, its prevailing strengths and weaknesses and, in effect, diagnose before seeking to prescribe a cure. However, diagnosis is not something that occurs in a vacuum, or in circumstances entirely unique to individual schools. Just as doctors use their knowledge of similar symptoms and illnesses they portend, so too can schools draw on the experience of others that have been through similar events.

Through a combination of learning from school improvement research and working intensively with schools to generate significant improvement over time, we have developed a framework for school improvement that helps schools undertake a diagnosis of where they are at.

Lead Article

While change is never linear, and always involves some twists and turns, our experiences suggest a progression of improvement through the three stages included in Figure 3, underpinned by quality leadership at each stage.

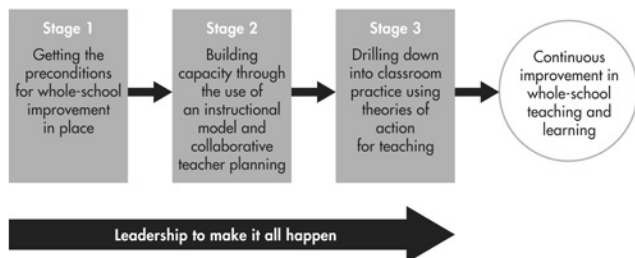


Figure 3: Stages of sustained school improvement
 (The Figure is taken from Macklin, P., & Zbar, V. (2020). *Driving School Improvement: Practical Strategies and Tools*, p.57 and is reproduced with the permission of the Australian Council for Educational Research).

Stage 1: The Preconditions

For over 50 years, as Michael Fullan eloquently outlines in his foreword to our latest book, school improvement and effectiveness studies have failed to gain traction in schools despite the consistency of what they found. This, we suggest, reflects the fact the research can tell us what a good school looks like, but not how it got there to start. This in turn makes it difficult for others to learn from the experience it had.

In 2009, Vic and his colleagues Ross Kimber and Graham Marshall were commissioned by the Department of Education in Victoria to

examine eight high-performing, socio-economically disadvantaged schools with a view to determining the sources of their success. Since all the schools involved were not initially high-performing, but became so over time, they not only could specify the characteristics they all shared, but also the means by which their improvement had been achieved. Although the context of each of these high-performing, disadvantaged schools was different, the way in which all of them substantially improved was the same, as illustrated in Figure 4 below.

The lessons identified from the study resonated with the sorts of factors commonly identified as being associated with effective and/or improving schools. What emerged as new, however, and seems to have subsequently struck a chord in many jurisdictions and schools, was the distinction they found between those lessons that constitute the preconditions for substantial improvement to occur (and arguably provide a place for the school and/or system to start) and other lessons that then enable the school to build on these preconditions and sustain improvement over time.

This is not to suggest that the lessons identified are entirely separate and discrete. All of them inevitably overlap and interact as leaders and teachers work in an holistic way to continuously improve their schools. However, it is to suggest that the foundations must be in place before a whole-school program of improvement can be built. More specifically, all the schools had to ensure:

- strong leadership with a clear vision and direction for the school;
- high expectations for all the students the school enrolls;
- an orderly learning environment throughout the school where students are well-known by the staff; and
- a focus on what matters most.

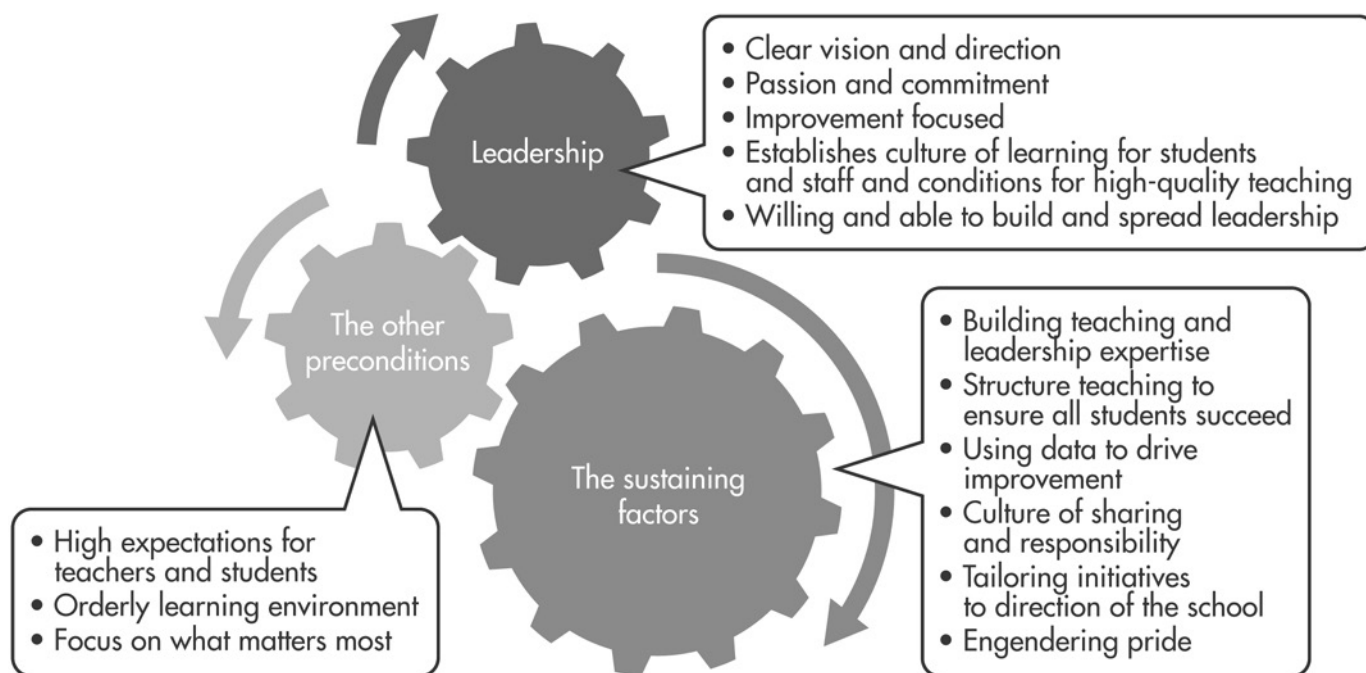


Figure 4: The high performing schools roadmap
 (This diagram was jointly developed by Ross Kimber and Vic Zbar. The Figure is taken from Macklin, P., & Zbar, V. (2020). *Driving School Improvement: Practical Strategies and Tools*, p.70 and is reproduced with the permission of the Australian Council for Educational Research).

The value of distinguishing between the two different sorts of lessons outlined, is that it provides schools with a theory of action they can pursue based on an analysis of how a critical mass of high-performing schools progressively transformed themselves over time. In other words, it provides the basis of a strategic approach to improvement, as illustrated in Figure 4, that can be replicated across schools, and the second edition of our book includes substantial advice, case studies and tools to assist schools to develop the preconditions where this is required.

Stage 2: Building teaching capacity

Ensuring the preconditions for improvement are in place can only take schools so far. Inevitably they will hit a plateau of improvement if it is only the preconditions that they address. This reflects the fact that although they are needed for the improvement journey to commence, they do not really ensure that teaching capacity is built and improved classroom practice results.

This is why the second stage of sustainably improving a school involves building the baseline capacity of teachers to plan more effective lessons and work together in ways that open up the classroom door. Central to this we have found in working with many schools and clusters over a number of years, is use of an instructional model to support teacher planning and coaching in professional learning teams to open the classroom door.

A good starting point in this regard is to pose the question to staff about how they know a good and effective teacher when they see one; and somewhat ironically, we commonly find that it is not something to which they have a ready response. The absence of any agreed or even codified understanding of what constitutes effective work in our profession is a gap that needs to be filled if schools are to support

teachers to increase their effectiveness and thereby enable more teachers to work like the best. Simply posing the question, “How do we know the best when we see it?”, stimulates discussion about effective teaching that can underpin the development of a shared view to guide the capacity building strategies the school can adopt.

Stage 3: Improving classroom practice

Building capacity along these lines, and as discussed in detail in our book, can help transcend the improvement plateau that is reached if only the preconditions are addressed. However, another plateau inevitably awaits that can only be breached by systematically working to improve the quality of teaching, and hence learning in all classes in the school.

This involves drawing on theories of action that are aligned to research and enabling more teachers to work like the best. Evidence-informed theories of action provide a means by which schools and teachers can systematically examine their practice, and then collectively work to ensure it is improved. In particular it helps shift the practice from undemonstrated beliefs that some teachers have about strategies that work in class, to what the evidence shows us works, and its use by all teachers in the school. This is particularly the case when the theories we adopt are linked to regular classroom observation where constructive feedback is provided to enable research-based improvements to be made.

There are, of course, a number of theories that can be used to improve teaching in class, but one we have found particularly effective over time is the use of learning goals to improve lesson planning in schools. Learning goals is one of the best entry points for enabling more teachers to work like the best because it focuses individual and collaborative planning of quality lessons and, as illustrated in Figure 5, frames virtually all that happens in class.

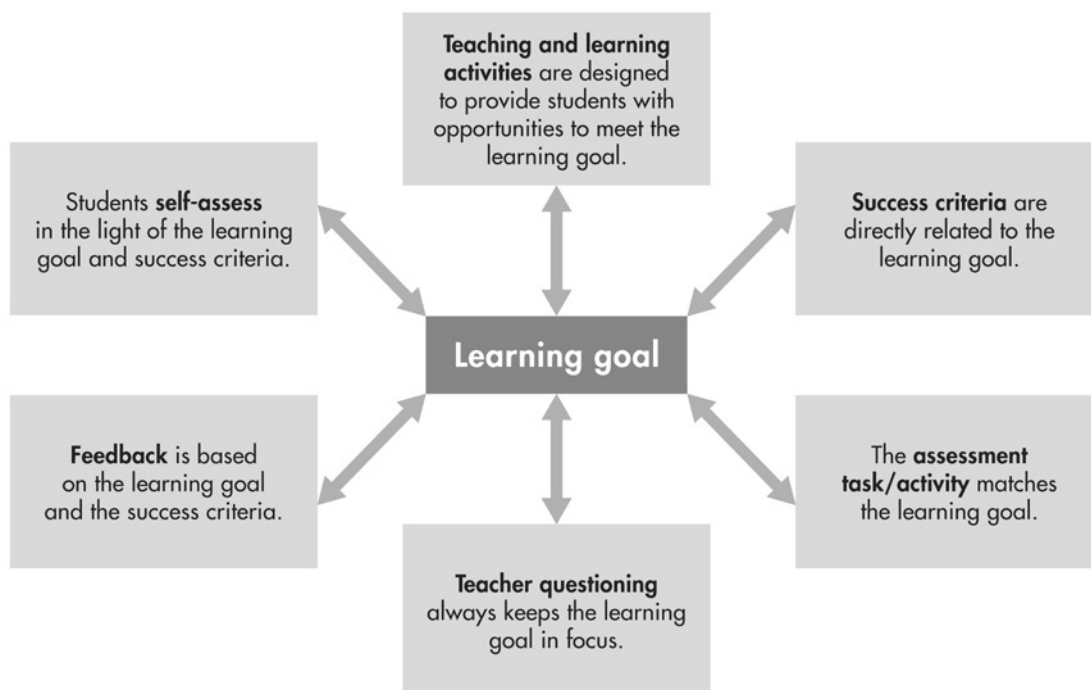


Figure 5: Learning goals as the frame for teacher planning

(The figure is adapted from one included in the (former) Curriculum Corporation Australia’s Assessment for Learning, ‘Learning Intentions’ Professional Learning module. Source: Curriculum Corporation Australia (now Education Services Australia) (n.d.). The Figure is taken from Macklin, P., & Zbar, V. (2020). *Driving School Improvement: Practical Strategies and Tools*, p.178 and is reproduced with the permission of the Australian Council for Educational Research).

Lead Article

Whether it be the use of learning goals to inform lesson planning, assessment to inform teaching, better questioning in class or some other theory of action to pursue, the third stage of school improvement is all about injecting a greater measure of evidence into the planning and delivery of what teachers individually and collectively undertake. In other words, this involves shifting the focus from inference of what teachers think might work to evidence of what actually does, including evidence from successful practice in other schools.

Leadership as the essential underpinning

Leadership is the difference between pockets of improvement in a school and whole-school improvement. In any school there will be areas that perform better than others. However, the excellent practices these teams adopt never go whole school in the absence of a leadership team leading it, with the necessary authority to drive it through. This is why leadership underpins all of the stages of whole-school improvement and pervades both this article and the whole of our book.

The question this begs, however, is what does “leadership” actually mean? While there are many taxonomies of leadership that can readily be found online, they commonly are not definitions per se, but rather descriptions of different leadership styles.

Our extensive work with schools suggests to us that there are basically two sorts of leaders, albeit stylised to make a point. Put simply, there are leaders who can make things happen in their schools and leaders who can’t. Looked at in these terms, leadership can be defined as the capacity to make things happen consistently in the school. Or even more specifically, to make the “right” things happen consistently in the school.

This requires leaders to diagnose and hence know where their school is at, know what to do, know how to do it, make it happen consistently while carrying people with them, and then knowing what to do next and so on in a cycle of continuous improvement depicted in Figure 6.

We have tried to capture this more fully in *Driving School Improvement* in a leadership framework we developed for the Queensland Educational Leadership Institute (QELI) which aligns to the stages of school improvement in Figure 3 and comprises the five elements, or leadership behaviours, of:

- diagnosing performance and prescribing for improvement;
- developing leadership to drive improvement;
- ensuring effective implementation of what matters most;
- leveraging the greatest source of improvement in schools – supporting more teachers to work like the best; and
- ensuring progress and keeping on track.

While the detailed explanation of each of these elements and the self-assessment we developed for it are beyond the scope of this article, suffice to say it is a framework that can guide:

- the recruitment and selection of new leaders in schools;
- the design and delivery of professional learning and other development opportunities for leaders and aspiring leaders in schools; and
- the self-assessment and reflection that leaders undertake as they strive to continually improve.

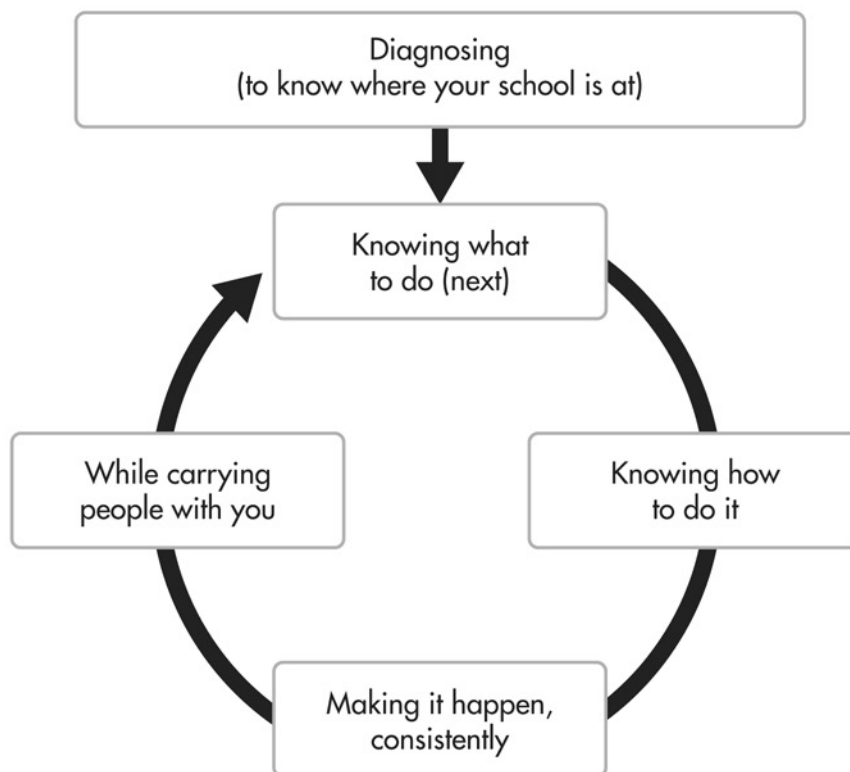


Figure 6: The work that leaders do

(The Figure is taken from Macklin, P., & Zbar, V. (2020.) *Driving School Improvement: Practical Strategies and Tools*, p.18 and is reproduced with the permission of the Australian Council for Educational Research).

Changing behaviour to make it all happen

Whether it involves leading a team of teachers or the whole school, supporting more to work like the best depends on changing behaviour so successful practices are more consistently used. And contrary to popular belief, this is less a matter of winning people's hearts and minds than it is of changing what they do.

A good example of this is community practice regarding the use of seat belts. The 1960s in Australia saw a sustained attempt by governments to educate the public on the value of using seat belts. However, the associated publicity and education campaigns appeared to have little effect. In December 1970, Victoria became the world's first legislature to make it mandatory to wear a seat belt. This saw a rapid increase in belt usage and a marked decline in casualties with the result that the rest of Australia followed suit. Relatively soon seat belts were almost universally worn by Australian car drivers and there would not be a reader of this article who would now get in a car without doing up their belt. Put simply, the behaviour of drivers was changed and their belief about the efficacy of seat belts followed later.

The fundamental improvement challenge that all schools face is to change teacher behaviour so more can work like the best, and student learning outcomes can be improved. It is a challenge that many schools around Australia are striving to meet, including all of the schools we cited in our book.

References

- Macklin, P. & Zbar, V. (2020). *Driving school improvement: Practical strategies and tools*. ACER Press.
- Sanders, W. L., & Rivers, J. C. (1996). *Cumulative and residual effects of teachers on future student academic achievement*. University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Centre.
- Zbar, V., Kimber, R., & Marshall, G. (2009). *Schools that achieve extraordinary success: How some disadvantaged Victorian schools punch above their weight*. (Occasional Paper No. 109). *Centre for Strategic Education*.



Pamela Macklin has held a number of senior positions in Australian education, including Deputy CEO (Professional Resources) at the Australian Council for Educational Research and Deputy CEO of Curriculum Corporation. She is an experienced senior executive, coach, teacher, education consultant and writer. Her interests lie in leadership coaching, the management of organisational change and improvement, educational policy, curriculum, assessment and school improvement. Her national and international work has focused on education reform and has included the development of policy and implementation strategies in areas such as ICT in education, literacy, numeracy, studies of Asia and gender equity.



Vic Zbar is recognised internationally for his writing on education and a range of education reports. Prior to the establishment of Zbar Consulting, Vic was the Assistant Director of Human Resources in the Victorian Department of Education, having earlier been principal adviser to the Chief Executive, giving him an in-depth knowledge of the work of most aspects of the then Office of Schools. He is a widely-published author in both education and management and is the author of the best-selling *Managing the future, and its sequel, Key management concepts*.

