



Citation for published version:

Goodall, JS 2014, 'The OIQ Factor: Raising your School's organizational intelligence. How schools can become cognitively, socially and emotionally smart', *Journal of Research in International Education*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 166 - 168. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240913518706>

DOI:

[10.1177/1475240913518706](https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240913518706)

Publication date:

2014

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1475240913518706>

University of Bath

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The OIQ Factor: Raising your school's organizational intelligence

How schools can become cognitively, socially and emotionally smart

Powell, W and Kusuma-Powell, O

John Catt Educational Ltd. Woodbridge

ISBN: 978 908095 91 6

Powell and Kusuma-Powell present their work as being for “teachers and other school leaders” which sets the tone and expectations from the start: teachers are not regarded as apart from school leadership, but as an integral part thereof. This is an interesting and useful – and at times frustrating – book, which could form a good addition to many school bookshelves.

This book was clearly founded on work in international schools; all of the examples are taken from this sector and it would seem the authors' expertise was gained in this market. However, the salient points made in the book should apply to any school, just as the original work on Organizational Intelligence should apply to most, if not all, businesses.

The OIQ factor begins with a preface which should be required reading – and understanding – for every minister of education. It clearly sets out some of the problems which, while obvious to many *in* schools, seem to be invisible to those who legislate *about* schools, the main issue being that schools are chaotic places, which don't admit of simple, technical solutions to their complex problems. The author set out to “reclaim our profession one school at a time” (pg 9), through the medium of Organisational Intelligence.

The main argument of the book is that school improvement depends not on isolated initiatives or even on the isolated work of individuals, but instead rests on the organizational intelligence of the whole. The authors define Organizational Intelligence as “the emergence of understood and agreed patterns of effective interaction” (22), leading to careful understanding of both product and process.

Perhaps oddly for a book aimed at improving schools, there is little in this work which relates to the actual activity of teaching; the examples used sometimes relate to classroom practice but the focus of the work is on the relationships between adults, mainly among school staff, though at times trustees are mentioned as well. This is entirely in keeping with the thrust of the book, however – which is that it is relationships among staff which need attention.

In chapter one, the authors set out to examine the concept of Organizational intelligence and how it can be applied to schools. They point out that although schools tend to attract groups of intelligent people to work in them, intelligence does not “add up”, as it were – they quote Albrecht's law, that groups of intelligent people will tend to act in ways that are other than intelligent. In this chapter, they highlight the importance of relationship when they define organizational intelligence as “*the emergence of understood and agreed to patterns of effective interaction*” (emphasis in the original) (22); it is not precisely what people do, but how they do it, that will determine the overall intelligence of the organisation, in this case the school.

The chapter ends, as do all chapters, with study questions and exercises. This format reinforces the concept that the work is primarily meant either for trainers, to use in their own work with schools, or for schools to use themselves; it is essentially an extended training manual.

Chapter three brings the concept of teacher leadership to the fore. After a fairly laboured excursus likening teacher learning to sheep dog trials, the authors make the very good point that issues relating to adult learning are vital but rare components of most school leadership training. They point out that effective leadership requires change across the board – in knowledge, wisdom, values and beliefs. There are two premises which underpin the work of the book: that the most meaningful learning takes place in social settings and that emotional intelligence can be learned and developed (57). Almost as a throwaway line, the authors state that all learning in schools take place in relationships (59). This is then followed by yet another set of prescriptive lists, of the “3 Ps of Emotional Intelligence (60ff), the 5 states of mind (64 ff), steps to overcome negative narratives (69ff). Such lists reinforce the training manual overtones set by the discussion questions and exercises at the end of each chapter.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with ways of growing OI, and putting it into practice, working smarter not harder (chapter 4) and collective enquiry (chapter 5). The authors offer the time honoured time management matrix (pg 86), which will be familiar to many readers, although they do offer a school-specific narrative for each of the quadrants. Through yet another laboured metaphor – this time dealing with table shape and heralding Camelot as social breakthrough – the books shows that the physical structures of schools mitigate against collaborative work, and again offers a formulaic list showing the reader how to overcome such obstacles.

Within chapter 5 is a section entitled, “Collaborative inquiry across cultures”, which essentially juxtaposes a typical school based culture, (low power distance, collectivistic) with that of boards of trustees (individualistic and based on power differentials). While many schools may not be so distanced from their governing bodies or trustees, the points are still well made and could easily apply to the differences between schools and the governmental bodies which oversee them.

Chapter 6 takes time out from the general argument for a more specific narrative, that of the inclusion of children with special needs. It will be remembered that the authors’ experience seems to be entirely within the realm of Anglophone international schools, and thus with schools which have the ability to refuse entry to such students with greater ease than would be the case for many state funded schools. While the authors make the argument that OI allows schools to be more inclusive, within this chapter is perhaps the most telling phrase of the book, “Our identity as a school is predicated on being learned, not on learning”. This phrase neatly sums up the message of the book: if we truly wish to improve our schools, they must become places of learning for all involved. This is hardly a new message; what the authors offer is rather a different way of achieving this end.

This leads directly to chapter 7, which discusses the business of leading adult learning, with yet another list, this time Kegan’s 4 stages of adult development (166ff). Chapter 8 takes this concept further and applies it to schools themselves, giving example of how schools can fit into Kegan’s stages, complete with a chart (202-3).

The penultimate chapter offers suggestions for understanding the level of OI in a given institution, and how to build on the status quo, leading to a “rubric for organizational intelligence” (214 – 5).

The final chapter offers very brief conclusions, returning to the central argument that “any effort to enhance collective intelligence is bound to fail unless it also improve the quality of relationships within the organisation” (228).

Comments on the work

This book begins with the very bold statement that “Many, perhaps even most, educational systems have got school improvement wrong”. While there is some merit in this claim – if we had school improvement cracked, all schools would be good to very good and clearly they are not – the solution offered here, Organizational Intelligence, is but one tool among many to support school improvement.

The claim is followed by statements which are fairly typical of the whole, such as “The authorities attempt to address the issues as a technical challenge”, and “they are simplistic in their approach”. We can all agree to some extent; we are all aware that the situation is far from ideal and there are some authorities who do precisely what the authors accuse them of. We all deal with the problems cited by the authors of “government thinking”, league tables, and a great deal of noise and little impact.

However, while the authors are correct that simplistic approaches to school improvement will not suffice, my main caveat with the books is precisely the issue of, if not simplicity, then a lack of criticality, particularly in light of the authors’ own acknowledgement of the complex, chaotic nature of schools.

The work would have more value – if much greater length – if the authors explained how they came to their conclusions in greater depth. They often give examples, but rarely explanations. Authors are cited as authoritative with no information as to why they should be taken to be so; we are not told of the background or the value of the research cited. Alternatives are rarely explored. The reader is often presented with standardized lists, such as the “7 norms of collaborative work” (95), “4 types of leaders” (113ff), 5 steps of collaborative coaching (120ff), with statements that seem to take such lists as normative; there ensues the discussion of yet another alliterative list (why do educationalists do this?) but no discussion of how the authors cited arrived at the list or whether or not it is a valid means of looking at the phenomena in question. This is, perhaps, reasonable practice for a training manual, and the authors are careful to cite sources so at least the reader can track down the original research.

One lacuna in the book is the treatment of governing bodies or trustees. (As the book is rather overtly focused on international schools, “trustees” may be the more appropriate term). Although such individuals are mentioned in examples, it is rarely in a light which shows them to be a part of the organisational intelligence of the school. Rather, they are generally shown as being apart, separated from the day to day running of the school, much more a part of the problem rather than the solution. I cannot but feel this is a missed opportunity, perhaps almost forced on the authors by their general sphere of activity.

This is not a book for research; it is far more praxis than theoria, although the theory is, generally, mentioned. The book is aimed at and serves schools and school leaders. It is probably of more use

to schools part way along the journey toward organisational intelligence than those at the very early stages. For those schools mid-way along the journey, however, it could prove a valuable resource.