ABSTRACT. School improvement is in danger of becoming simply a tool for the agendas of policy makers to raise attainment in western school systems. While this agenda is important we argue that the focus on attainment and school performance is inadequate to meet the challenges of young people’s futures. Furthermore we argue that an emphasis on performance and delivery of outcomes is taking the focus off learning. Schools will have no currency in the future unless there is greater emphasis on learning. This paper is a contribution to the debate about the future direction of school improvement.

To develop these arguments this paper explores three inter-linked themes:

1. School improvement theory and practice need to change direction to take more account of schools’ contexts and their likely future contexts.
2. Our beliefs about the purposes of schooling and assumptions about school improvement, its aims and how it is promoted are affected by our worldviews. The worldviews currently holding sway in schools and education often work against an emancipatory agenda.
3. School improvement must focus more on the learning of all members of the school community.

1. INTRODUCTION

We write from within the school improvement tradition, working mainly, but not exclusively, in the UK alongside teachers in schools to improve the learning of young people. We believe that school improvement has a vital role to play in transforming schools so that they more effectively meet the needs of young people for their futures. But we argue in this paper that school improvement is in danger of failing in this mission.

It is an important question to ask: “what is school improvement for?” Improvement is something no-one would want to avoid, like motherhood and good food, self-evidently desirable and A Good Thing. With this in mind, it was not easy to understand the view articulated by a participant in a seminar recently: “I don’t really believe in school improvement”. Perhaps this speaker was wiser than she at first appeared and was referring to something that might be written with capitals as ‘School Improvement’. In one discourse school improvement refers to processes which have specific...
and undesirable features to which the teacher may not feel affiliated. She may have been referring to the ‘cherry-picking’ by policy-makers of school improvement strategies, concepts and language for short-term policy objectives. She may have been referring to the unrealistic way in which school improvement, presented in this light, sees the school as a hermetically sealed environment, having little interaction with its immediate context, let alone as a part of a complex and shifting world. She may have been feeling that the dominant school improvement discourse is limited to immediate, narrowly defined and incremental changes in schools. Our frustrating experiences of school improvement leads us to argue that we are living at a time when the discourse needs to change. It needs to take a longer view, one that meets the needs of young people in their futures and promotes a more sustainable basis for school reform efforts in the coming decades. School improvers must take a wider view, one that considers the contexts in which teachers and schools and young people must work, and a deeper view – one that focuses on learning.2 We note that recent school improvement literature has focused more on the classroom, where more difference can be made than at the school level (Hill, 1997), but our case is that we must also go deeper and pay attention to the young people’s experiences of learning, and less to their performance. This paper reflects work in progress. We examine some elements of the current discourse of school improvement and in particular consider three interrelated themes in order to argue that school improvement is in danger of loosing some important emancipatory and transformative possibilities:

1. Theme one: the context in which education systems, schooling and school improvement work occurs is being subject to rapid and accelerating change.
2. Theme two: education systems, schools and school improvement need to evolve in response to these changes.
3. Theme three: school improvement needs to focus on learning in order to contribute to a more sustainable and transformatory future for young people, teachers and school communities.

2. THE CHANGING CONTEXT

Our first theme is concerned with the urgent need to re-examine thinking about the role of education and the purpose of schools in the light of a changing context. We argue that school improvement must be related to the re-examination of the purposes of schools in the future and that this will