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‘Improvement Matters: the Question of Impact’

A symposium convened by

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Planning, Tracking and Evaluating Impact: towards an integrated approach

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Paper presented within the symposium

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Planning, Tracking and Evaluating Impact: towards an integrated approach

This paper sets out a theoretical context for consideration of impact, discussing issues of accountability, evaluation and evidence in relation to the current discourse of school improvement and effectiveness. The limitations of summative evaluation of programmes and projects are considered and an alternative approach is suggested in which planning, tracking and evaluation of impact become formative, integral to school improvement.

Introduction: issues of impact

There is no escape from the concept of impact in education. Innovation, whatever its source, is intended to make a difference in particular ways, therefore the actual effects of policies, programmes and initiatives must be examined against the intended effects, to determine whether an intervention has been successful. This requires a consideration of evidence that can be called upon to demonstrate whether positive change has happened. In England the pace of educational change continues to be relentless, therefore we cannot avoid the question of impact. The rapidity and intensity of change heighten the importance of investigating whether this enormous variety of activity is valuable and fruitful.

This simplistic argument raises many questions and issues in relation to a consideration of impact. These threaten to shackle the discussion of impact to the extent that it becomes either counter-productive or meaningless. Many of these questions are raised in the other two papers within this symposium (Field, 2006; Precey, 2006), but are considered briefly again here. First, the measurement of actual against intended outcomes subscribes to a prescriptive notion of change in which effects are mapped out and a linear process of cause and effect is assumed, where we know educational change to be more complex and therefore need to develop more sophisticated understandings of *causality* (Durrant and Holden, 2005; see also Cordingley *et al.*, 2003). Linked to this, it is usually impossible to isolate the effects of one intervention from others when many changes are occurring simultaneously and each is progressed through the interlinking activity of many different protagonists (Gronn, 2003), therefore we need to examine properly the *agendas* and *processes* of school change. Third, the extent to which an intervention is regarded to be successful depends upon having an agreed definition of success within which those intended outcomes are, in turn, defined, therefore we need to consider *educational purpose*. Fourth, the passive voice in the above paragraph ducks the question of ownership: who sets the criteria, who carries out the evaluation of impact, and for whom? Thus, issues of *responsibility* and *accountability* are crucial in a discussion of impact.

Authentic dialogue and action within current policy frameworks

The above aspects of the discussion on impact – causality, agendas and processes of change, educational purpose, responsibility and accountability - can begin to be addressed, if not easily reconciled, by adopting an integrated approach incorporating dialogue around such issues, to inform as well as evaluate action. It is important, in consideration of impact, to take an authentic, sophisticated and realistic view of school change and human activity within the complex organization of a school, a view which may be widened to a district or network of schools. Discussion about impact, carefully framed, may open up rather than negate questions about educational purpose. Involvement in activity concerning the planning, tracking and evaluation of impact (Frost and Durrant, 2003) can also help to develop individual and collective responsibility and balance internal with external accountability.

It is vital that this discussion about impact takes place in the context of the accountability requirements for headteachers, schools and those that support school improvement within current policy frameworks. However, this may not only support but also transcend policy agendas (Durrant and Holden, 2005), since it provides a focus for involving people in dialogue, planning and action that takes full account of educational purposes, processes and outcomes. This is valuable in itself in building capacity for sustainable school improvement, as governments and their policies come and go.

School effectiveness, school improvement or something more?

While no-one could disagree with the notion of 'school improvement' or 'school effectiveness', it has been argued that we have let such notions connect research, policy, practice and administration to the extent that they exclude challenges and alternative ways of thinking (Fielding, 1997; Wrigley, 2003; Elliott, 1998; MacBeath, 2004a). Wrigley (2003) argues that school improvement, which has the characteristics of process orientation and qualitative emphasis, seems to have been subsumed into school effectiveness rather than continuing to challenge its reductionism. MacBeath (2004a) notes the contribution of the school effectiveness movement to our understanding. He recognises slow improvement in the sophistication of data, for example placing greater emphasis on value-added as opposed to 'crude' attainment data, and on factors influencing differential effectiveness. However, he shows that the emphasis on school effectiveness holds a pervading concern for social efficiency and accessibility of information which can in fact contribute to the depletion of social capital. It encourages greater mobility and coerces teachers and headteachers into playing the "high-stakes competitive game" (MacBeath, 2004a:30, see also Durrant and Holden, 2005). This creates greater disadvantage for the 'have-nots' and the lowest achievers. Importantly, MacBeath, following Cuban, notes that within this maelstrom, it is teachers who hold the key to understanding, implementing and adapting change in their classrooms and school contexts. However, this is a tall order when they are locked into a culture of performativity, part of the system they might seek to change.

Within the rhetoric of reform, words such as 'transformation', 'empowerment' and 'emancipation' have become part of the mainstream; they no longer mean anything radical. A school replaces its 'school improvement plan' with a 'school transformation plan'; its teachers note that the details of the plan are essentially the same, usually resulting in cynicism rather than genuine critique of the language and content of reform. They realise that this kind of language, more often than not, signals the assertion of a new approach within the same narrow educational aims of raising attainment. Another example is the ubiquitous 'shared leadership' which Gunter suggests is organized "functionally downwards" in order to get learning and teaching done, measured and made visible, empowering teachers "to do what they have been told to do" (Gunter, in Wrigley, 2003:32-33). The purpose – raising attainment – seems always a 'given' within the centrally determined agenda. But it is *always* "...time to remind ourselves of what schools are for and what they might become" (MacBeath, 2004a:19).

This climate is particularly prevalent in England, where attainment, the 'subset' of achievement that can be measured, has been privileged over other kinds of achievement by Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education). Our notion of success is tied to this, in contrast with other regimes which have a more creative and holistic notion of effectiveness (for example, see Norway's curriculum framework as cited by

MacBeath, (2004a), which emphasises spirituality, creativity and humanistic, social and environmental values). Within the prevailing performative culture in England, McGilchrist *et al.* (2004) suggest that we value what we can measure rather than measuring what we value (see also Durrant and Holden, 2005), and argue for a much broader definition of achievement. There is a danger that over-simplification of the discourse leads to a belief in mechanistic application of formulae for effectiveness in order to raise pupil performance. It is not that the ‘characteristics of effective schools’ such as identified by Sammons *et al.* (1995), are not important, but they do not tell the whole story or give the whole answer. They gloss over social and political issues of equity and diversity, the complexity of processes of school and systemic change and the uniqueness of context (McGilchrist *et al.*, 2004). They are about the structures and organisation rather than content (MacBeath, 2004a) and perhaps most importantly, they avoid the fine-grained details of classroom practice and the day-to-day concerns of teachers, which have to be the focus of improvement.

New directions: people, processes, relationships and communities

Amongst alternative viewpoints, Elliott (1998) argues emphatically that we need to move beyond these statements or recipes (many of which are platitudes – ‘purposeful teaching’; ‘a learning environment’ and so on), to regard school improvement as a discursive rather than rational process. Wrigley calls for a more critical approach to the purposes of education:

“... a new direction for improvement, one which is not so dependent, which can focus on social justice and responsibility and global citizenship, which is future orientated and genuinely transformational. We need to engage in an active search for new models of democratic learning, not sit blindfolded on the conveyor belt of ‘effective’ schooling.” (Wrigley, 2003: 43)

Applying this to the question of impact, we might seek exploratory and formative dialogue and critique around impact issues, starting at the planning stage of school change, as opposed to restricting discussions of impact to summative evaluation of a process of directed change. Structured dialogue engages people with notions of impact throughout the change process. This enables them to explore matters about which they generally care deeply, wanting to ensure that their endeavours ‘make a difference’; it is on this basis that they are prompted to take appropriate action, whatever the impetus of change (Frost and Durrant, 2002; 2003). How much more powerful is this integrated process than ‘bolt-on’ evaluation against externally set targets, using language which Fielding (2003) argues

“foregrounds some things and marginalises others...it valorises what is short term, readily visible and easily measurable....it has difficulty in comprehending and valuing what is complex and problematic, what is even and unpredictable, what requires patience and tenacity...it finds difficulty in distinguishing between levels of change, between what is fairly superficial and what is, to coin another already over-used, increasingly presumptuous phrase, ‘transformational’”. (Fielding, 2003: 289).

Fielding goes on to describe the “increasingly fatuous, hectoring tones of public statements and policy aspirations”, while he sees the language of impact as a “blunt instrument which will produce commensurably crude findings” (2003:289).

Wrigley (2003) suggests that we need to ‘theorise about power’ and enable people to reassert their right to debate educational purpose and explore moral and political values. In other words, to answer Fielding’s criticisms, language is only language and we must not be browbeaten into accepting and using that which is imposed, we must encourage questioning, critique and meaning making across the range of school improvement activity. Indeed, crude language and simplistic tools can often be problematised more readily than more sophisticated instruments and arguments, which may be a good starting point for raising the debate. It prompts the questioning of standards and ethos but also, where appropriate, leads to an examination of social and political issues, community and culture. School cultures are highly complex and contested and interact with external cultures including youth cultures; they do not have a recipe, so monoculture in the form of “co-opting teachers into the government’s view of successful schooling” (Wrigley, 2003:35) will not work. Blunt instruments cannot fashion the future. If we wish to effect improvement in the broadest sense, we need to focus not on applying formulae but on *engaging people* – pupils, teachers, support staff, headteachers, parents and others – in building their own learning community. Ranson (2000) has called this a ‘pedagogy of voice’, in which there is recognition of different participants and the distribution of resources such that they may participate equally. This encourages not just ‘listening’ but “activity systems”, communities of practice that enable learners “...to develop shared understanding and agreement – a common voice – about the learning process, its purposes, beliefs and activities”(p.266). This, surely, is the foundation of organisational and systemic improvement.

Therefore, in relation to impact, we need broader but structured definitions of criteria for success, which might be agreed differently for different scenarios, by the people directly concerned. Indeed the process of agreeing them contributes to engagement and ownership of those who are to be involved in any change process, which is likely to make the process itself more powerful. In other words, focussing on impact is likely to maximise impact (Frost and Durrant, 2003; 2004).

Impact in the classroom

As noted earlier, there seems to be a gulf in the argument so far, between considerations of school culture, systemic change and social emphasis and the day to day work of teaching and learning in classrooms. Yet it is here that teachers wish to make a difference and it is here that ‘success’ is actually achieved, however it may be measured. Wiliam and Bartholomew (2004) suggest that it is difficult to change individual teachers’ practice, partly because of the paucity of research evidence, even now, about the learning and teaching process and partly because teaching relies to a large extent on personality and circumstance. They suggest that this results in greater emphasis on structural and administrative reform rather than classroom-based change, for example concentrating on “...the number of episodes into which an hour’s instruction ought to be segmented, rather than addressing what, exactly, should be happening in each episode” (p.280). MacDonald (1996) similarly notes the lack of research evidence upon which to base reform, leading to a vulnerability to “reform fads” and a tendency to fall back on scientific models of “prediction and control” that are apparently intended to “serve the aims of individual and social emancipation” but in fact may be achieving the opposite (p.245). Arguments that educational policy rests to a large extent on convenience, simplicity and political expedience are extremely

persuasive. MacDonald's concerns about curriculum are particularly worrying considering the fact that any teacher under 30 educated in England is the product of a National Curriculum which he suggests "might have been borrowed from the Victoria and Albert Museum" and within which "the space for educative agencyis closing fast" (MacDonald, 1996:242).

The impact of teacher leadership

Yet teachers can, and do, make a difference in terms of deeper educational aims and purposes, whether within or despite current policy constraints. This demonstrates that there is scope for creativity, development and positive change. A wealth of evidence comes to light on any occasion where teachers have the opportunity to share their experiences and ideas around an initiative or within a particular structure. Recent vibrant examples in my own sphere of activity, working within CELSI*, include:

- teacher-led research and development in a Networked Learning Community (NCSL, 2005),
- development of pedagogy and practice within the Key Stage Three Strategy (the early years of secondary/high school) based on government materials (DfES, 2004),
- individual and collaborative enquiry-based development within Masters programmes (Frost and Durrant, 2003; Durrant and Holden, 2005),
- projects involving action research partnerships between teachers and 'creative professionals' within the community (Creative Partnerships, 2005).

Each of these yields dozens of examples of teachers challenging and developing their practice with a clear focus on pupils' learning. Although all these projects and programmes have their own targets and success criteria they have some common themes. They involve teachers in enquiry, critique and collaborative working; they develop individual teachers' leadership; they have structure and frameworks of support; they need full internal support from headteachers. They have introduced external support, often working in close partnership with the university, Local Authority (district) and/or other agencies to provide critical friendship, particular knowledge and expertise, application of process and conceptual frameworks (Frost and Durrant, 2003; Durrant and Holden, 2005).

What of the impact of these activities? Research into the impact of teacher-led development work (Frost and Durrant, 2002; 2004) revealed that teachers can determine a wide range of different influences and effects resulting from their own professional activity and also identify a complex set of factors that affect that influence. These effects are not always valued and publicly recognised (Frost *et al.*, 2000; Frost and Durrant, 2002; 2003; Durrant and Holden, 2005), but teachers have a sophisticated view and relish opportunities to reflect upon and analyse such activity

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and its effects. They say that this gives their work value and that personal reflection, or better still shared reflection, is valuable in supporting further improvement. Many academics, advisors, researchers and consultants working in support of school improvement can provide a wealth of anecdotal evidence of excellence in classroom practice and of teachers, students and others leading one another and learning together in developing their practice.

The question of impact lies at the heart of such discussions and reflections. All the initiatives listed above, and many more besides, include an element of evaluation and analysis of the benefits and outcomes of the development activity. All are subject to summative evaluation in relation to external, prescribed frameworks and criteria. This may be part of the inspection process to determine whether a school is following government policy and is also reflected in test results and league tables by which school is compared against school, as in the case of the Key Stage Three Strategy. It may be required to enable funding to continue, as in the case of both Networked Learning Communities and Creative Partnerships. In the case of the Masters programme it is part of the accountability of the university to the Training and Development Agency, as explained in Kit Field's paper in this symposium (Field, 2006). However, there is an added dimension in some of these, and many other projects in which CELSI is involved, in that we are actively introducing and integrating opportunities and tools for planning, tracking and discussing impact. Intended outcomes and success criteria are debated and determined from the outset, revisiting the issues as the projects or programmes progress. These are based on a framework developed by Frost and Durrant (2002) through collaborative research into the impact of teacher-led development work. (For a full version of the framework, see www.paulchapmanpublishing.co.uk/resource/durrant.pdf, Appendix 3). This has been reported previously at ICSEI as a conceptual framework for impact, the development of which taught us much about the effectiveness of teacher leadership, its power and also its limitations. The factors affecting these aspects we found to be as much institutional as individual; it was clear from our research that the greatest impact lies in the synergy of the two. As we have discussed before (Frost and Durrant, 2002; 2003; 2004; Durrant and Holden, 2005), it requires strong and active leadership by the headteacher or other senior leader to build capacity for sustainable improvement. This is allied with the individual energy, commitment, knowledge and skill of teacher leaders, and may draw in many others within the extended school community.

Impact at all levels of learning: the importance of leadership

A strong theme emerging from the impact research (Frost and Durrant, 2002) was that teachers have a highly developed understanding of the complexity of the relationships between pupils' learning and their own professional learning, although this is often tacit rather than explicit knowledge. They may also have a sense of the way in which the school as an organisation learns and moves forward, and of the links between their own school and others. The level of understanding beyond the classroom depends greatly on teachers' own circumstances, for example whether they are of sufficient experience and seniority to gain such an overview and whether their school is part of a group (consortium, cluster, federation...) providing opportunities for networked learning. Pupil learning, professional learning, organisational learning and systemic learning are nested together, so that we need not only a focus on each of these dimensions but also to consider the ways in which these layers are related and influence one another. It is unhelpful and counter-productive, for example, to focus only on children's needs and pupil outcomes without considering professional development implications. At the same time there is much professional development activity that leaves teachers without the understanding, time or support to apply this in their own classrooms, let alone use their learning to support the development of colleagues' practice or to contribute to organisational development.

This leads us to a broader consideration of the leadership dimension. Discussion of impact is most shallow when it is applied retrospectively to judge the actions of implementers, particularly where using a 'tick box' survey. It is far more powerful where the discussion belongs, in a real sense, to the leaders of change. As we have argued before (Durrant and Holden, 2005; Frost and Durrant, 2003), headteachers usually have the greatest influence on the ways in which leadership is interpreted and exercised more widely by members of the school community. However, there is usually greater power in organizations where leaders surrender authority and build greater 'leadership density' (Sergiovanni, 2000). Here, the total leadership exercised across the organisation is more significant than the amount of strong leadership vested in one individual. This accords with Spillane's notion that leadership is more powerful when 'stretched' over the individuals in an organization to include both formal and informal leadership roles (Spillane, 2003; see also Frost and Harris, 2003). Crowther *et al.*'s (2002) concept of parallel leadership is useful in considering how this can be achieved through collaborative learning, culture building and developing school-wide approaches to pedagogy.

Leadership, learning and the impact debate

We may now envisage a multi-dimensional model where all levels of leadership (of headteachers, teachers, pupils and others) are applied to all levels of learning (pupil, professional, organisational and systemic). Within such a 'matrix', the development of dialogue around issues of impact, from planning through leadership of development to evaluation, provides a powerful focus for improvement. This is demonstrated habitually in our work with tools based on the conceptual framework for impact described above (Frost and Durrant, 2003; Durrant and Holden, 2005). Some examples are as follows:

- Teachers, headteachers and others planning a particular school development, whether internally or externally driven, consider the intended outcomes in relation to pupil, professional, organisational and systemic learning. Prompts are given to ensure that all possibilities are considered.
- Teachers incorporate their ideas about impact into their planning to ensure that there is shared understanding about the purposes of the development, to inform and direct the changes and to communicate a rationale to others involved.
- Discussion of impact begs the question of who might usefully be involved in the development in order that the impact might be greater. This leads to a consideration of opportunities for collaboration and strategic links both within and beyond the school. This is often the point at which the benefits of working with others are realised, for example teachers may wish to work with another subject team, convene a group of pupil researchers or contact colleagues from another school.
- When intended outcomes have been discussed, it is possible to plan in advance for the gathering of evidence to track the development and its impact in relation to

these outcomes (while allowing for inevitable unintended effects as well). An enquiry approach throughout the development monitors progress, enables it to be shared and celebrated and informs further leadership of change. This enables impact to gather momentum.

- Criteria agreed at the planning stage can be used to frame a final evaluation, owned and understood by those involved in the change process.

We have gathered many case studies to show how this focus on impact can in itself make the impact of development more powerful (Frost and Durrant, 2002; Durrant and Holden, 2005). It can become embedded in a school's ways of working, as part of a school's culture. A case study of one school's journey of improvement (Frost, 2005) reveals detailed evidence to demonstrate how a school in challenging circumstances can sustain an astonishing pace and range of multi-faceted activity, yet maintain clear purpose by engaging everyone – pupils, teachers, teaching assistants, headteacher and others - in dialogue around learning, leadership and impact. This has resulted in significant improvement not only tactically, in terms of attainment, but fundamentally, in terms of building capacity for sustainable improvement in the future (Gray *et al.*, 1999).

Returning to the problematic aspects of impact identified at the start of this paper, we can see that the kind of discussion and application described above can enable those involved in school change to question and agree educational purposes for any particular intervention and, importantly, to look for synergy in the interplay of school improvement activity. Dialogue about outcomes and evidence forces consideration of the difficulties of determining cause and effect. Usually, particularly where carefully facilitated, this prompts the use of more sophisticated tools than the basic tick-box survey (see MacBeath, 1999; MacBeath and Oduro, 2005) to try and represent the complexity of change and gain an authentic view of impact. This may, for example, involve greater use of qualitative data; it may also encourage more intelligent use of the wealth of data that already exists in the school. It often gives 'permission' for a more critical approach to evidence and the application of professional judgement and internal analysis, rather than requiring unquestioning acceptance of information and external interpretation. Finally it opens up discussion about school improvement processes and encourages greater internal responsibility and accountability.

Responsibility and a changing professional culture

The question of impact, is not, therefore, principally to do with evaluation of initiatives, it is something much deeper. An initial challenge is to ensure that school improvement processes take account of the role of all teachers, along with other members of the school community. Within this context, dialogue around impact issues is a powerful focus for moving processes of school improvement forward, where construed carefully and facilitated and framed appropriately. Far from brutal external summative evaluation, this kind of dialogue enables teachers, headteachers and others to contribute to school improvement, to shape change processes and outcomes, to take responsibility and feel that they have some measure of control. This is a hopeful, challenging, creative process, but it does raise expectations about what constitutes 'normal' professional, social and political responsibility. Amongst teachers, who are at the crux of the improvement process, building capacity for leadership of learning and school improvement is about extending (or re-extending) concepts of professionalism (Stenhouse, 1975; Hoyle, 1995). Critical use of evidence and frameworks for enquiry linked to discussions about impact give a 'hard edge' to development of practice. Questions, issues and challenges are brought to the surface, creating a critical and authentic dialogue around learning that fuels further learning. Once initially engaged, people become committed. Trust is crucial (Bottery, 2004) in opening up leadership and ownership of the impact debate. Rather than just implementing change or being at its mercy, this enables all those within school

communities to operate more effectively, intelligently and critically within changing policy contexts (Elmore, 2004) and to make meaning of their lives in relation to educational purposes and processes.

Accountability and improvement

In concluding this paper it is helpful to return to the notion of 'discursive self-awareness' which Elliott (1998) encourages schools to foster. This he describes as "...a capacity for discourse with others about one's practice and its effects" (1998:188). From his perspective in supporting classroom-based action research, highly relevant to discussions of teacher-led school development and impact, he does not see this discourse as by any means an individual, isolated and inward-looking process for teachers. Rather it is concerned with "...trying to establish conditions in their schools for the discussion of classroom data with their peers and pupils". He warns that this is sometimes difficult to establish where "...the system of roles and relationships they are locked in manifests the kind of structural properties Simons (1985) refers to as 'hierarchy', 'territory' and 'privacy'" (Elliott, 1998:188). In this case he recommends the use of an external facilitator to begin to develop the right conditions for such discourse. However, he asserts that "the possibility of teachers changing their practice depends on their being able to *legitimate* such changes with their peers and the pupils they teach" (p.188, my italics). It is therefore imperative that teachers themselves develop confidence in handling, interpreting and owning information and evidence from different sources as part of the 'pedagogy of voice' referred to earlier in this paper (p.5), widening to include extended school communities.

This does, as Elliott notes, require a reconstruction of teachers' professional culture. It progresses beyond the tactical, short-term measures that are simply reflected in better test scores, towards "capacity building...developing organisational resilience and flexibility to meet or lead change" (MacBeath, 2004a, after Gray *et al.*, 1999), which requires all the levels of learning to be addressed – pupil, professional, organisational and systemic. It follows that one of the outcomes should be raised attainment. Issues of impact provide a focus for critical discussion, evidence gathering, action and evaluation as teachers and others develop their understanding and awareness of the interrelated dimensions of leadership and learning contributing to school improvement. Rather than driving this process, accountability follows from such self-evaluation, internal self-awareness and self-efficacy (MacBeath, 2004b), as people within the school community are allowed to concern themselves with taking responsibility for improvement. Impact in this context is not something about which we need snapshot external judgements. It is a vital focus for the process by which those within schools and education systems learn about themselves, their purposes and their own learning.

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