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Research Associate Report

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Improvement through evaluation

Exploring the self-evaluation processes used by a sample
of schools

Autumn 2006

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Introduction

David Miliband's announcement about the new relationship with schools in his North of England speech in January 2004 placed school self-evaluation as a central priority for schools. Since then, school leaders have, arguably more than ever before, become focused on:

- what it is they know about their school through self-evaluation
- how this information can be used to inform improvement
- establishing approaches that will provide this information

Self-evaluation is essentially, therefore, a formative process that, drawing on the work of Professor John MacBeath (NCSL, 2005a), can be seen as:

- an essential component of school improvement
- not an end in itself or a stand-alone activity
- at the core of the work of schools
- built out of the day-to-day experiences owned and valued by staff
- based on evidence about the standards achieved by pupils, the quality of teaching and the effectiveness of leadership and management
- not just about the results pupils attain but achievement in the broader sense, capturing high points through diaries, photographs and videos

This research responded to the increased focus on school self-evaluation and set out to explore what schools were already doing in this field in 2005, and by uncovering this practice, highlighting the implications for school leaders.

Background

In 2001, Ofsted was involved in a project across 14 European countries to investigate the features of effective school self-evaluation. This, along with other factors, paved the way for subsequent changes. The new arrangements would ensure:

- the engagement of all stakeholders
- that schools were free to choose self evaluation processes
- the self-evaluation form (SEF) would be a key part of a school's evidence in its form as a summary record. It would:
 - set out the school's strengths and weaknesses
 - cite evidence of how the schools know they have them
 - explain what the school is doing to address them
 - describe what impact actions are having on pupils

Schools, with appropriate external support and challenge, would take responsibility for their own quality assurance by evaluating their performance, making the necessary plans for improvement and implementing these plans effectively.

“We believe that getting the balance right between external accountability and challenge and schools’ internal quality assurance is crucial to school improvement” (NCSL, 2004, p 4).

For many years, Professor John MacBeath has been involved in research on self-evaluation. In *Self-evaluation: What’s in it for schools?* (2003), he and its co-author, Archie McGlynn, point to the model of three main levels for self-evaluation.

- Pupil learning is at the centre of this model as it is the core purpose of schools.
- If pupil learning is to take place the right climate and conditions have to be in place and, therefore, the second level for evaluation is culture.
- The third level to be evaluated, in this model, is leadership.

However, the involvement of the home and community is critical to the success of the school and no meaningful evaluation can take place without them.

If schools are to measure their effectiveness in these areas, MacBeath and McGlynn (2003) state that professional dialogue needs to take place about a number of elements:

- the purpose
- the framework
- the criteria
- the tools
- the process
- the end-product

When these elements are agreed and self-evaluation involves the whole learning community, the school will have a rich source of information. This will enable schools to tell their own story instead of as it was in the past, when outsiders were allowed to tell it, to amend it, to abridge it and even to add their own ending. Self-evaluation, in this context becomes:

“A dynamic endless process which is at the heartbeat of the school and the lifeblood of learning” (MacBeath 2005).

John Dunford, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) focuses on ‘intelligent self-evaluation’ and the importance of creating an evaluative culture. He places data at the centre of the processes and events that comprise the New Relationship with Schools. This data not only consists of the hard data, the easy-to-measure pupil attainment, but also soft data such as that arising from interviews.

He identifies five questions (NCSL, 2005a) for schools to ask:

1. Are you asking the right questions?
2. Why ask these questions?
3. How should these questions be asked? (ie, what tools do we need? Who asks it?)
4. Who needs to be asked?

5. How does the data get used? (ie, what happens to the answers? How do we communicate this to the stakeholders? Do we need to ask the question differently next time?)

Schools need to ensure that they deal effectively with the data gathered and that they do not fall into the trap of collecting too much data – “data-rich and workload-light” (NCSL, 2005a, p 29). He states:

“It links with the SIP in a continuous process of review and development that is at the heart of any successful institution” (NCSL, 2004, p 7).

Research methods

When considering the focus of the inquiry, I e-mailed a number of headteachers within the Sefton area of Liverpool and asked them what aspects of school self-evaluation (SSE) they would be interested in reading about. Almost all responded to the question and the three most popular replies were centred around:

1. What are the best ways to gain information and a picture of the school which we can then act on?
2. How do we check our organisation is being effective? (That is, getting the results that we want).
3. What is the correlation between accuracy in SSE and the effectiveness of the school?

From these replies, the main research question was formulated:

Do the processes schools use identify what they need to do to bring about improvement in pupil progress and achievement?

Six schools were selected for the study visits: one secondary and five primaries. The locations, intake and size of the schools varied, and they were selected on the basis of being successful schools with a good track record. Two of the schools were beacon schools and others had been identified, by the LEA, to share good practice in self-evaluation. All the schools had strong and robust monitoring and evaluation systems whose latest Ofsted reports had been successful.

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews took place with the schools' headteachers, each of which lasted approximately one-and-a-half hours. The headteachers were sent the questions in advance, which were:

1. What processes do you use to evaluate the work of the school?
2. Do they identify what you need to do to bring about improvement? Give specific examples, ie actions and outcomes.
3. What factors contribute to success?
4. What factors inhibit success?

The interviews were taped and these were used to support the notes made during the interview. The notes were written up and sent back to the headteachers for validation.

Findings

Processes used by the schools

All of the schools had processes which provided evidence that in turn enabled them to identify strengths and weaknesses. In the main, this evidence was grounded in hard data.

The processes used by all schools were:

- lesson observations
- scrutiny of work
- scrutiny of planning
- analysis of pupil performance data
- pupil interviews and discussions
- monitoring and evaluating 'on the hoof'

Lesson observations

These were mainly carried out by the leadership team for the purpose of monitoring and evaluating the quality of teaching and learning. Some of the lesson observations were linked to performance management and others to part of the schools' monitoring and evaluation cycle. In all the schools, feedback was given to celebrate strengths and identify weaknesses.

If, from conducting these observations, a common thread running throughout the school was identified, such as the ineffective use of teaching assistants, this would feed into the school improvement plan. If there was an area of development identified for one teacher, support would be given, for example in the form of team teaching, lesson demonstrations and support in planning.

Scrutiny of work

This would usually be undertaken by the subject co-ordinator. It would have a variety of focuses including presentation, curriculum, assessment, teaching and learning strategies and standards and progress. Subject co-ordinators sometimes found it helpful to talk to the pupils about the work in their books whilst undertaking the scrutiny.

Scrutiny of planning

This would again be carried out by the co-ordinator, who would be checking for full coverage, differentiation, evaluations and learning outcomes. Where discrepancies occurred or development needs were identified, support in the form of co-planning would be offered. In one school, an advanced skills teacher (AST) was asked to work alongside a teacher whose planning did not demonstrate it was meeting the needs of all abilities within the class.

Analysis of pupil performance data

Subject co-ordinators would analyse test papers at question level to identify areas of strength and weaknesses. The outcomes of this analysis would inform the school improvement plan; for example, multi-step word problems were identified as a weakness by one school and a series of twilight sessions, led by staff from the school and the LEA adviser, was planned to support teachers' expertise in this area.

The leadership team would generally undertake this evaluation of pupil attainment and performance. They would monitor the progress of pupils, including those from different groups, from year to year, compare class with class and teacher with teacher, along with benchmarking with other schools. They used a range of data sources for this, including Ofsted Performance and Assessment reports (PANDA), Pupil Achievement Tracker (PAT), Fischer Family Trust (FFT) and Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS). The groups that the school would single out for analysis were gender, special educational needs (SEN) and vulnerable children.

Pupil interviews and discussions

Talking to pupils about their work took place in all schools in some form and, along with the other co-ordinator, monitoring cited above would form the evidence for the co-ordinator's report. These reports were usually compiled with the intended audience being the headteacher or senior leadership team and this would be added to the bank of evidence the school needed to collect to make informed judgements. Like the lesson observations, the co-ordinator's report would celebrate strengths and identify weaknesses. Decisions would be made by the headteacher or the headteacher and senior leadership team as to which issues should form a whole-school priority within the school improvement plan and which might require a lower-key, gentle reminder or a quick fix.

Although all schools involved pupils in discussions and interviews about their work in school, in early 2005 these processes, along with the involvement of the whole spectrum of stakeholders, were in the early stages.

This gave the schools evidence and informed action necessary in such aspects as curriculum reform, the personalisation of learning, the use of intervention programmes and raising expectations.

Monitoring and evaluating 'on the hoof'

This was a very important process used by all the schools. Walking around the school when it was empty, at lunch-time, at different times of the day, outside at the beginning and the end of the day, enabled the school to gather a whole raft of data which enabled it to identify what was going well and what could be better. This was mainly carried out by the headteacher but was also used by senior leaders within the school to gather informal but, nevertheless, valuable cultural data about the school's organisational practices and nature.

Specific examples of school self-evaluation leading to improvement

Monitoring and evaluating the aims of the school

One school in particular paid great attention to this process. At the beginning of each academic year, the school evaluated how successful it had been in the previous year in delivering the school aims, vision and motto. All staff had been involved in the formulation of the aims which came from school self-evaluation of where the school was and what it needed to do to give its pupils “the best chances in life” (headteacher). If some areas were judged to be weak they formed part of the school improvement plan. The soft data collected from this process would highlight action directed at aspects such as self-esteem and respect. The processes for this comprised:

- The headteacher, senior leadership team and middle leaders collecting data through both formal monitoring and more informal walks focused on behaviours and attitudes across the organisation, for example, how people relate to one another.
- They evaluated this data in terms of its representation of the school’s culture in relation to its stated aims.
- The evaluation was used in discussions between leaders and subsequent work with staff and pupils to improve aspects such as respect and self-esteem. Any aspects identified would be a priority in the school improvement plan and, therefore, have success criteria and intended outcomes that could be measured.

“After evaluation, everyone will have more knowledge and some of it will lead to improvement” (headteacher).

“The purpose of evaluation is not just about improving SATs, but moving the school forward in its broadest sense. The school is aiming to promote values and principles such as love of school/learning, confidence etc, which in the long term it believes will raise standards” (headteacher).

In the same school, exam results are evaluated by teachers, heads of departments and the leadership team. Each department has someone from the leadership team as a mentor who works with them in a supportive role. If improvement is not acceptable, the teacher and department are given greater guidance as to what they need to do. Ultimately, however, the philosophy is that the responsibility for improvement is in the hands of the teachers.

“People have got to believe things will get better to have any chance of success” (headteacher).

“It is the responsibility of all staff to evaluate their own performance. They are collectively responsible for maintaining standards” (headteacher).

The school has external verification that its self-evaluation processes have led to improvement: the percentage of A to C GCSE grades has jumped from 17 per cent to 58 per cent in a particularly deprived area with severe economic problems.

“Improvement priorities directed at self-esteem and respect are bearing fruit” (Ofsted report, 2004).

Improving maths

One school identified achievement in maths as an area for improvement and undertook an analysis of SATs and optional SATs papers. Where 75 per cent or above of questions were answered correctly, this was identified as a strength; below 50 per cent, as a weakness. The areas of weakness formed the action plan and were highlighted in teachers' planning. Staff development was provided by staff – not just the maths co-ordinator – with expertise in the curriculum area. This comprised elements including:

- demonstration lessons
- twilight sessions focused on professional development
- team teaching and sharing good practice
- the use of ICT. For example, an AST maths teacher plans for a maths lesson supported by interactive teaching programmes for use on an interactive whiteboard and is able to share this electronically with colleagues through the school's intranet, thereby developing a shared resource on which others can draw.

The headteacher said that in the past the subject leader would identify gaps for the school improvement plan, but now question-specific hard data is supporting the process.

In this example, this process did lead to an improvement in pupil progress and achievement in maths as shown in SATs and optional SATs.

Improving ICT

In another school, the self-evaluation processes used identified the underuse of ICT to support teaching and learning. The school had all the necessary hardware and software but lesson observations, a scrutiny of work and interviews with pupils revealed it wasn't being used. The school identified what people needed to do to be confident in using ICT through an audit of staff needs. This led to:

- a programme of training targeted at these needs
- a programme of monitoring by the subject co-ordinator to ensure that teachers were using ICT
- the provision of extra resources and training in the use of these

The school's actions did focus on learning, and support for teaching and standards improved as a consequence

Improving consistency

A lack of consistency was identified by development teams¹ in another school. Areas in which inconsistency was identified included:

- curriculum planning
- use of resources
- time-allocation
- assessment
- expectations

The development teams used the processes cited earlier in this report to come to this judgement:

- lesson observations
- scrutiny of work
- scrutiny of planning
- analysis of pupil performance data
- pupil interviews and discussions
- monitoring and evaluating 'on the hoof'

This evaluation was not top-down because all the teachers belonged to one of the teams. The effect was to galvanise teachers in identifying these issues and taking ownership of this process. They identified what could be improved and put in place an action plan with a clear purpose based on the findings which led to an improvement in pupil progress and achievement.

Addressing inconsistencies across the organisation is very much resonant of the within-school variation, which is the subject of NCSL's research study (NCSL, 2005b) in which schools took very specific steps to reduce variation between pupil outcomes.

¹ Development teams in this context were cross-year group teams organised to enable direct involvement in the self-evaluation process and to take forward school improvement priorities to enable greater cross-school working.

Case study

Some of the schools, which were part of a networked learning community, were faced with the question of how to make good or very good schools become outstanding. How do schools that have no key priorities move forward?

Initially, schools looked at attainment but found that more of the same doesn't always improve standards. They decided to undertake work on emotional intelligence with the support of two educational psychologists from within their authority.

Schools involved in the initiative looked at emotional intelligence and how it would raise attainment. The schools used SEBS (social, emotional, behaviour skills) materials, which teach children social and emotional skills.

The processes they used were:

- An audit of the essential elements of emotional intelligence. Members of staff were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 10. Initially, staff completed the audit individually and then the results were collated to give a whole-school picture. This provided baseline data for specific action to be taken to move the school further along the scale and, six months later, the audit would be revisited.
- Structured interviews with learners and staff – learning conversations. These learning conversations comprised a process that enabled the school to identify need through dialogue in which both parties listened. These were initially brokered by an educational psychologist and would enable children to evaluate their lessons either verbally or in writing.
- Lesson observations focusing on the emotional climate were conducted by the educational psychologist. All this information provided the evidence to enable the school to move closer towards the emotional learning environment, which they believed would raise standards in the widest sense.

1. The way forward – drill down deeper to the emotions

The headteacher of one school within the network was able to tell the story of how she was able to move the school from very good to outstanding. The processes already cited in the report were used but, on their own, were not enough.

“I needed to stop them thinking about the ‘what’ and start thinking about the ‘how’” (headteacher).

2. Thinking and talking about the ‘how’

School self evaluation – let's give the children a voice

The school had an existing opportunity for the ‘pupil voice’ to be heard within the school through its school council, but creating a voice for learning was a new venture. This was not an easy development for the school as it did not have a ready model for involving

children in evaluating their learning. The school put this down, in part, to the fact that the adults in the schools didn't take part in this sort of process when they were children. When schools involve everyone in self-evaluation, including pupils, it can, for some, be a threatening experience and the culture or climate in which it is done is a key factor. The headteacher in this instance recognised that there needed to be a high level of respect, believing that when children are confident there is a level of respect from the teacher, which is reciprocated with mutual respect.

When the headteacher spoke to colleagues outside her school about the initiative, she was sometimes met with comments such as: "You can't allow children to rule the roost;" or: "There could be a danger this could run away from you." She found, however, that there has been no abuse of this permission given to the children to say what they think.

"They run ahead in front of you and then come back to meet you" (headteacher).

The head was aware that the level of staff self-esteem and emotional intelligence would be key factors in this type of initiative, and that some staff would be concerned and worried about the new approach, so continuing professional development (CPD) would be a big issue.

This was not an area where the head felt they could say, 'We're all going to do this', as they considered that would result in failure.

"You get people trying who aren't confident and, therefore, will fail, and you don't want staff to experience failure, although the aim is for everyone to come into the fold eventually" (headteacher).

"Let the runners go with it; a few brave teachers dotted round the school is enough to get it going. They feed back and support those less keen. Teachers were frank and would say things like... 'I'd better not do that again' and 'did I spend all night preparing that and you didn't get it?'" (teacher).

The learning conversations – a process for self-evaluation that enabled the school to identify need – became a dialogue between two equals where both parties listened.

- How was it for you?
- What's it like being a child in this class?
- What's it like being a teacher in this school, spending hours preparing and marking work with little quality to show for it?
- Children would evaluate their lessons, either verbally or in writing, and they were given a voice, for example, "I can't learn like that," or "I can't learn sitting here."

Children might say "I don't get this," which is different from "I want you to teach me that again." It involved unpicking the question, ie, "what is it that you don't get?" Sometimes, it's how it's been taught but the children would say

- "Can I try it on the computer?"
- "Can I sit on my own?"
- "Can I ask David to explain it to me?"
- "This suits me, this doesn't suit me."

The children were included in the self-evaluation; it wasn't a system and it wasn't done to them. This manifested itself in a range of areas; for instance, children were allowed a say in the way their work was presented:

“If children are given this respect and confidence about themselves it feeds into how they perform” (headteacher).

Children became more mature about having a conversation with an adult about a range of issues:

- What was wrong at home?
- What was wrong in the playground?
- Why they couldn't do that maths.
- Why they were aggressive.

Small things, like putting up their hands, became less problematic because children understood they could say anything and people would listen – that they wouldn't laugh.

School self evaluation – let's change the curriculum

The headteacher was faced with hardworking teachers in the school who were on a treadmill, as she described it – plan, teach mark, plan, teach mark – and children in the school who were having it 'done to them', and sometimes there was not the quality to show for all the hard work.

“You can't separate curriculum planning from emotional intelligence. Through the curriculum you can change ethos. By making the curriculum more manageable for pupils and teachers the ethos changes” (headteacher).

The First Steps model of learning was adopted – PEWIT: problem-solving, embeddedness, working memory, interaction and time – and emphasis was put on working memory. This enabled children to work within their comfort zone, “I can do”, and the school had classes of “can do” children. Pupils were able to work independently and manage their own learning due to the focus on emotional intelligence, which focused on high self-esteem. The classroom environment encouraged risk-taking and creative thinking. The school was able to evaluate how successful it had been in meeting the outcomes by doing a second audit of the essential elements of emotional intelligence.

These processes, which provided soft data, did identify what the school needed to do to bring about an improvement in attainment and achievement in its broader sense, but the headteacher admitted: “It is really difficult to quantify all the things that are undoubtedly giving us success.”

The evidence to substantiate this improvement was reported by the headteacher and validated by external sources such as advisers, inspectors and other visitors to the school.

- Calm atmosphere and children on task in lessons.
- Quality work in children's books.

- The feel of the place – ethos.
- Hard-working, motivated staff.
- Distributed leadership.
- Personalised learning a strength of the school. This was characterised by looking afresh at the curriculum, assessment for learning, learning to learn, mentoring and coaching and providing the students with a voice.
- Continued improvement in SATs as shown by trends over five years.
- School to be judged outstanding in many areas.

In September 2002, schools involved in the Networked Learning Community (NLC), Janus, believed that developing an emotionally intelligent school with its emphasis on the well-being of learners would lead to improved standards. In September 2005, the new Ofsted inspection arrangements placed the well-being of learners, Every Child Matters, at the centre of the new inspection process for all children's services. The work of the school in this case study and their colleagues in the NLC promotes and underpins the new process.

Implications for school leaders

Factors that contribute to success

Factors that were felt to contribute to success were:

- ownership
- realistic distribution of responsibility, directly involving staff in self-evaluation and action-planning at different levels so that they are doing and are not 'done to'
- robust monitoring and evaluation policies that set out what is to be evaluated and how
- a strong emphasis on individual accountability but supported by teamwork
- open and transparent processes that convey no hidden agendas and consequently develop trust
- processes that are clear in purpose, high on impact in terms of pupil learning and not bureaucratic
- processes that identify strengths and not just weaknesses
- a headteacher who champions self-evaluation as a core activity

Factors that inhibit success

Factors that were felt to inhibit to success were:

- focusing on aspects that do not make a difference in the classroom
- too little or too much self-evaluation
- not being realistic about what people can do – issues of capacity
- bureaucracy
- lack of trust
- a focus on top-down accountability

Three leadership questions

Questions for leaders to consider within their own contexts that arise from this study are as follows:

- Which self-evaluation processes are going to have most potential impact on pupils' learning and – in relation to the Every Child Matters agenda – well-being?
- To ensure ownership and manageability through distribution of responsibility, who within the school community can take responsibility for carrying out these processes and for identifying improvement actions from these?
- What structures – for example team-based approaches – will support this?

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the headteachers of all the schools in Sefton included in this research, and the education psychologists, for their time, co-operation and good humour in supporting me with this inquiry.

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