FACTORS INFLUENCING THE TRANSFER OF GOOD PRACTICE

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1   Introduction

This project, funded by the DfES, was carried out by the Centre for Educational Innovation at the University of Sussex and the international think tank Demos.

- Research *aims* were 'to study and report on the factors facilitating or constraining the transfer of good practice between schools at school or individual level', including both classroom practices and management or organisational practices.
- Research *objectives* were to understand more fully the challenges of the transfer of good practice from the standpoint of the *partner* or receiver: to understand more fully the *nature of practice* and its reception: and to understand better the challenges for the *originating* institution or person offering to transfer some of their good practice. Fieldwork was carried out during 2003 and early 2004.

2   Key Findings

The following key themes emerged from the study, which are discussed in more detail below:

- Joint practice development – we suggest that 'joint practice development' is a more appropriate term than 'practice transfer' or 'transfer of good practice'. Talk of 'transfer' is misleading because it misses out the mutuality of the process. It also marginalises the importance of developing a new way of working that fits the different context of the partner teacher.
- Relationships – evidence shows that the development and / or continuity of certain kinds of trusting relationships are fundamental to the transfer of good practice. Prior relationships are often important as they provide a basis of trust.
- Institutional and teacher identity – how teachers see themselves and others in the practice transfer process influences their approach to collaborative learning. 'Badging' of institutions and individuals can hinder the transfer process.
- Learner engagement – we suggest that probably the most important aspect of the transfer process from the partner standpoint is that it should be, if not learner-led then learner-engaged. i.e. practice transfer is more likely to be successful when the recipient of the practice has been involved in the process of agreeing and planning the transfer activity.
- Understanding time – the most common issue raised as an obstacle to practice transfer referred to lack of time. Time is needed to: create what a practitioner sees as 'good practice'; learn to transfer these practices, very often with the assistance of outside support; learn and adopt a new practice, including building trust and relationships conducive to learning from others.

3   Background

Policy makers, academics and practitioners tend to agree that spreading good practice from one school to another is important in improving the quality of teaching and learning across the school system. However, they tend to bring to this issue a range of purposes and views.

Policy makers
For policy makers, the fundamental challenge is to *scale up good work*. Often this is about spreading practice that has been pump-primed to areas where it is not funded, without losing the dynamism or authenticity of the original. Indeed, successive government initiatives have *assumed that good practice can be identified and transferred*.

Academics
Meanwhile, many *academics* involved in developing and researching 'good practice' have a *greater sensitivity to the complex variables* involved in its transfer to other cultures and contexts.

Practitioners
In the research discussed below, those *practitioners* to whom we talked generally welcomed the principle of 'sharing good practice' between schools.

They often had a strong sense that *approaches to teaching and learning that have been developed by and with other practising teachers* were to be trusted, that they were more realistic and grounded in professional skills and knowledge than programmes that are prescribed centrally.

They were keen to stress that *most teachers welcome learning from others* where this is constructive and helpful. For many, *de-emphasising competition* and *enabling collaboration* between schools marks a return to the *key values of education*, although for many others it has still not progressed far enough.

Nonetheless, a significant number of practitioners also remarked that collaboration was *in its early stages*, particularly in relation to secondary-to-secondary work. Its relative newness may thus account for some of its successes and it remains to be seen whether impressive achievements can be maintained when this aura rubs off and such work becomes routinised and commonplace.

Practitioners also expressed a number of *important caveats*. Some felt that collaboration was simply *a latest policy trend or 'flavour'*, to which they were accordingly obliged to subscribe. Even those who endorsed it also admitted that *its actual benefits had yet to be proved*. Many noted its *difficulties and time-consuming nature*, that it would not happen spontaneously but involved skills that had to be developed and learnt, especially in areas where competition had been particularly intense, and that this had concomitant implications for the resources it required. Finally, although research participants were usually enthusiastic about sharing practice, they also reported *cases of resistance, often from headteachers*.

Thus, *spreading good practice remains very difficult*. It seems that policy makers lack the formal knowledge about how to spread good practice while too few practitioners actually know how to do 'practice transfer' effectively.

This research offers some insights which may help to *understand* some of those difficulties and *identify and learn from* some of its successes.

4   Methodology

To meet the research aims and objectives we conducted in-depth qualitative research (combining school visits and telephone interviews) with over 120 practitioners who have tried to transfer good practice within current government programmes. Our research design fell into a number of categories: institutions (schools), clusters, individual practitioners, and brokers.

- We carried out research with 10 *Beacon and Leading Edge Partnership schools* and 17 schools with which they had worked. We visited and interviewed two *Specialist Schools* and four of their partner schools. We also contacted 9 schools that had 'abandoned' or *discontinued* transfer work.
- We researched three *clusters of schools* within the Excellence in Cities (EiC) or Education Action Zone (EAZ) programmes, in Liverpool, Manchester and London and interviewed a number of heads from schools in challenging circumstances. We also researched two virtual Education Action Zones.
- In relation to *individual practitioners*, we interviewed 13 *Advanced Skills Teachers* (ASTs) and 10 partners who had worked with them. We also interviewed 12 *Best Practice Research Scholarship* (BPRS) teachers. 12 *headteachers* were interviewed specifically for this phase of the research, but in total, a further 24 were interviewed through the course of the research, making a total of 36 in all. We also researched 13 'brokers' of good practice, some of whom we encountered during other phases of the research such as the EiC work.
- We undertook 2 in-depth *case studies* through which we explored in greater detail questions about teachers' practice and the 'partner's' perspective.

- In addition, we collected data from 11 schools that had participated in the *'Leading Aspect'* programme.
- Finally, during the course of our research we also held 2 *invitation seminars* on 30th June, 2003 and 23rd April, 2004 with colleagues operating at a national level in areas of work including or allied to practice transfer.

5   Research Findings

From 'practice transfer' to 'joint practice development'

We would question whether the joint work of teachers that provided the focus of this research is best described as 'practice transfer'. We suggest *'joint practice development'* provides a better description of what teachers aspired to and what they actually achieved together. This change in terminology validates the existing practice of teachers who are trying to learn new ways of working and acknowledges the effort of those who are trying to support them, both in their having developed creative ways of working and the complex task of opening up and sharing practices with others.

The necessity of relationships and trust

The development and / or continuity of certain kinds of *trusting relationships are fundamental to the transfer of good practice*. They are not a welcome extra or a pleasant accompaniment, but the necessary foundation of the complex, demanding and rewarding process of professional learning across institutional boundaries that this research seeks to understand.

Prior relationships, often of some significant duration, were seen by many participants to be enabling. Whilst the nature of these relationships clearly differs in many important respects, what remains constant is their generic capacity to motivate, energise and, most importantly of all, provide the basis of trust on which the development of professional exchange and subsequent learning is founded. Whilst the significance of prior relationships does not suggest that establishing new partnerships is doomed to failure, it does indicate that *if new arrangements are to be fruitful they require considerable investment of time, resources and commitment.*

Networks are excellent for distributing and exchanging ideas, and general intelligence seeking. However, transfer of practice is more intrusive than transfer of information or ideas and therefore more demanding on the quality of the relationships between those involved in the process. Moreover, the difficulty of discussing practice, which has an important tacit dimension, puts limits on the quality of communication without joint observation. This requires the trust of teachers being observed by possible future partners in practice development; and will clearly be helped if both partners play the roles of both observer and observed.

Teacher and institutional identity

How teachers see themselves and others in the practice transfer process is hugely influential in their approach to collaborative professional learning. Consequently, the prevalent *'badging'* of institutions and individuals often turned out to get in the way of the kinds of learning that collaboration policies advocate and many teachers desire.

Any policy initiatives that construct *'originator'* and *'partner'* identities may *actively inhibit development within partner institutions*. Furthermore, originating schools and individual practitioners within them often gained as much or more than those who were the targets of their assistance: in the resonant words of one respondent, *'The best get better'*

Learner engagement

Perhaps the most important single aspect of the transfer process from the partner standpoint is that it should be, if not learner-led then *'learner-engaged'*. Practice transfer is more likely to be successful *when the recipient of the practice has been involved in the process of agreeing and planning* the transfer activity.

Skills of transfer most valued by partners included:

- Clear aims and realism about what could be achieved.
- Being able to demonstrate the practice being advocated.
- Responsiveness to the requests of partners.
- Empathy with individual partner's circumstances.
- Willingness to engage with partners on a mutual basis.
- Being realistic about what it is possible to achieve in the given time.
- Availability for ongoing contact from partners.
- Being able to provide 'how to' advice at the same time as a broad theoretical or contextual picture of practice they advocate.
- Hands on understanding of being a teacher.

Understanding time

The most common response to our questions about obstacles to practice transfer referred to lack of time. Even though most of the teachers we spoke to were generally keen to get involved in the kind of transfer work that runs through this report, they insisted that those advocating practice transfer *deal realistically and responsibly with the need to provide time to support it.*

Just as it is increasingly common place to create 'wait time' for young people to think and reflect and make meaning out of a teacher's question, so it is equally important that *'understanding time'* be seen as *an indispensable component of good professional learning.* Time is needed to

- create what a practitioner sees as 'good practice'
- learn to transfer these practices, very often with the assistance of outside support
- learn and adapt a new practice, including building trust and relationships conducive to learning from others.

The work of transfer
Practice transfer seems to involve three different kinds of teacher learning: *experiential learning, reflective learning,* and *contextual support for learning.*

Structures and transfer
There are broadly four important factors that touch on the kind of structural supports needed to undertake practice transfer work successfully. These have to do with

- Time
- Communication
- Funding and
- Technology.

People and transfer (1) headteachers & staff
Whilst considerable faith is being placed in *headteachers as key enablers of collaborative professional learning* a number of our research participants felt that such faith might be misplaced or in need of further qualification.

Nonetheless, the overwhelming response from the headteachers interviewed about practice transfer was very positive. They argued that *heads and senior staff affect the transfer of practice both within and between schools in four key ways* by

- 'setting the tone' of the school
- distributing leadership
- building networks and
- co-ordinating or facilitating practice transfer

There was some evidence to support the importance of *informal contexts for learning* i.e. that much of what teachers learn from each other is accomplished incidentally, both on the job and away from it too.

There was small, but significant, evidence that *student themselves have a significant role to play* in practice transfer.

People and transfer (2) external brokers and networks
Brokering practices and capacity between teachers and schools emerged as a key element in the development of collaborative professional learning. However, despite its promise, existing provision appeared *patchy* and the notion of brokerage seems conceptually *under-developed* and empirically of *uneven quality.* Where it seemed to be *working well* it involved a number of elements and roles.

- Brokering practices -knowing about and making information available
- Brokering relationships - putting people in touch
- Enabling fruitful dialogue - creating a sense of audience and a sense of community to provide a context for practice sharing
- Resourcing joint work - providing resources that could make practice sharing happen
- Being a catalyst

What is 'good practice'?
Teachers are used to making judgements about pieces of good practice they observe. Their *criteria for whether or not it is 'good'* usually depend heavily on relevance to their own context and the students they teach.

Judgement of decontextualised representation of a practice is often not much use to teachers and only valid in research terms with the aid of a very substantial research programme across different contexts. It is much more promising to use a *"conditional hypothesis" approach* that investigates the conditions under which the practice is most likely or least likely to have a positive impact.

How do we know if 'good practice' is good?
Although the *credibility of judgements* that a practice is 'good' often seems to rest on links to national examinations or tests, this is usually unhelpful and misleading largely because the link over time and between different teachers is difficult to establish and almost certainly not causal.

The best we can do in most situations is make judgements about the *enthusiasm both of the students and the teachers* involved in the new way of working; for it to *seem to improve learning;* and for changes in practice to *feel do-able and sustainable over time.*

The *provenance* for any particular school practice will partly depend on how the school has developed its own version of the practice, whether potential transferees

are impressed by that strategy and the extent to which the development process itself has made good use of formative evaluation.

The challenge of evaluation
There was *very little formal evaluation of practices being transferred* by either the originator or the partner. Teachers gave four different kinds of reason for this which included

- the sheer pressure that the current policy context puts schools under and the perceived climate of hyper-accountability
- its inherent difficulty
- its elusiveness
- the amount of time it would take to do it properly

'Naturalistic' evaluation and decision-making is likely to be the model most appropriate and most relevant to teachers thinking about practice transfer. This involves a *gradual process of engagement* with the new practice through developing some understanding of what it is like to teach that way, how best to involve one's students and what kind of a difference might it make to the motivation and achievement of one's class, particularly for those members of it who are a current source of concern.

Should 'good practice' be accredited?
During the course of the research it was frequently suggested, by policy makers rather than by teachers, that good practice might be *validated* in some way.

Some people felt that a *'user warranty'* would ensure that the practice being transferred was good, that the partner would not be wasting their time investing effort to adopt or adapt it, and that the resources put into promoting practice transfer could be seen to be spent wisely and transparently.

This approach is inherently unsound. One has to ask precisely what is being warranted. Is it one teacher's practice on a particular day, or a much larger chunk? What kind of evidence is to be expected, and who will pay for the collection of such evidence?

Still more important is the *delusion that the practice transferred will be equivalent to the whole practice of the originating teacher, and that any warranty will necessarily transfer to other teachers and other contexts.* It would require an expensive research project to sort out that problem. It might be better to build on systems which put teachers in touch with each other and *leave space for professionals' skilled judgements* rather than imposing orthodoxies.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

Our research report makes 19 recommendations based round the 5 key areas *Joint practice development, Relationships, Institutional and teacher identity, Learner engagement* and *Understanding time.* We set out those recommendations below clustering round their intended audience (a) school practitioners, (b) local government and other enabling organisations and networks, and (c) central government policy makers and agencies. [*R* refers to the Recommendation Number in the Research Report].

Recommendations for *School Practitioners*

CPD & teacher identity (R 7)
School CPD co-ordinators and senior staff should ensure that both the content and promotion of professional development programmes take account of a wide range of teacher identities. They should not assume that teachers know what they need or that they will go out and get it if they do. Lessons might be taken from inclusive design here which would tell us to develop strategies for engagement that are designed around those least likely to articulate their needs, but which make engagement more appealing and straightforward to all in doing so.

Identifying individual priorities (R 12)
Plans for collaboration should stress the importance of learner engagement. Teachers in partner schools should be encouraged to identify their own priorities as part of their ongoing development as expert practitioners. School managers should take care to ensure the voice of the partner teacher is both heard and respected in this process.

Taking partner needs seriously (R 13)
In tandem with this learner-driven needs identification process, 'originators' should consider how they will

- Set out clear aims and be realistic about what could be achieved;
- Be able to demonstrate the practice being advocated;
- Be responsive to the requests of partners;
- Empathise with individual partners' circumstances;
- Demonstrate willingness to engage with partners on a mutual basis;
- Be available for ongoing contact;
- Provide 'how to' advice at the same time as a broad theoretical or contextual picture of the practice advocated;
- Demonstrate hands on understanding of being a teacher.

CPD & institutional needs analysis (R 14)

Schools should be enabled to identify their own development priorities. Planning submissions and bidding processes should scaffold a rigorous analysis of development needs by the schools themselves. School Improvement Partners could play a leading role here in supporting schools to prioritise their development needs.

Creating common time across institutions (R 16)

Schools should consider re-organising the school day in order to free up teacher time with minimum disruption to students. This report has highlighted a number of ad hoc solutions, but a systematic solution will require co-ordination between collaborating schools. Common timetabling across school networks or LEAs could be important, enabling synchronised release time for teachers from different schools.

Recommendations for *Local government and other enabling organisations and networks*

Developing joint practice development capacity across the system (R 1)

LEAs should demonstrate their belief in the value of certain kinds of collaboration. They should not only consider making joint practice development a way of implementing a range of EDP priorities, but also make joint practice development a priority in its own right. In addition they should work with other LEAs to share their own practice. All of these activities would be of practical as well as symbolic significance.

Extending & initiating joint work (R 4)

LEAs, other enabling organisations and networks should recognise that whilst they play an important role in brokering and fostering new relationships in the short-term, they should not forcibly or artificially sustain them. They should either

- encourage existing partnerships to grow and develop organically and / or
- acknowledge that significant amounts of time will have to be invested before the benefits of rich collaboration for significant professional learning become evident. Those involved in new relationships must feel independently engaged in them, rather than simply tolerating imposed connections.

Mapping relationships (R 5)

LEAs, enabling organisations and networks should consider mapping existing relationships between teachers to identify 'hubs and holes' of connectivity. This could be represented using social network analysis software for example and used by LEAs to take a strategic view of networks. Mapping has the potential to achieve two things. The first involves highlighting existing networks or 'hubs' allowing brokers to build on prior relationships, maximising the benefits of trust and openness. The second involves identifying 'holes' enabling brokers to utilise opportunities to diversify partnerships and encourage mutual challenge.

Recommendations for *Central government policy makers and agencies*

Deepening understanding of 'brokerage' (R 2)

Further study is required to develop a robust intellectual account of brokerage, that summarises the current state of our empirical knowledge in this domain, and recommends a number of fruitful ways forward.

Lowering the stakes, raising aspiration and achievement (R 3)

Those responsible for the wider framework of education policy in England should work towards lowering the stakes and seek less counter-productive ways of raising levels of aspiration and achievement in schools. Steps should be taken to reduce the conflict between policies designed to encourage collaboration and those that militate against it. 'Joined up' working both within and between departments will be vital to deliver a consistent message.

Relationships & practice development (R 6)

Further intellectual enquiry and empirical research work is required to articulate a typology of relationships that illuminates the different kinds of relationships associated with different kinds of collaborative work, including joint practice development. This typology should be tested in the field to further illuminate whether different kinds of practice require or favour different kinds of relationships. Conceptual and empirical work will also be necessary to identify the required conditions for these relationships to thrive and how they might be fostered.

Collective badging (R 8)

In cases where badging is deemed appropriate, all participants should be part of a collective badging which honours all those involved as in the Leading Edge Partnership Programme (LEPP).

Financing the whole partnership (R 9)

Where partnerships are funded externally, the partnership as a whole should receive the money and be free to allocate it independently amongst partner schools.

Joint leadership (R 10)

Both 'originating' and 'partner' schools should be encouraged to lead school partnerships, with sensitivity to the burden this might place on struggling schools.

Developing 'originator' capacity across the system (R 11)

All schools should be encouraged to see themselves as both originators and receivers / partners of practice. To

this end, money should be made available to ensure that every school can develop and fund at least one AST. This should promote reciprocal relationships where all schools confidently identify and value their own good practice. Furthermore, with ASTs now emerging with responsibility for things like 'assessment-for-learning' it is worth considering the creation of ASTs in CPD.

How teachers think about, evaluate & seek to improve their practice (R 15)

Expertise in the work of transfer is exceedingly thin and we have drawn attention to the difficulties of researchers accessing and studying it. Studying the transfer of how teachers think about, evaluate & seek to improve their practice - the meta-practice of improvement - is a strong candidate for worthwhile subsequent research.

Deepening understanding over time (R 17)

HEI involvement in the development of a thoughtful, research-engaged joint practice development should be encouraged, with university staff (co) researching and / or (co) developing the sharing of good practice with teachers, funded e.g. through HEFCE funding streams. The National Centre for Languages and a number of Training Schools have already begun to work along these lines. That involvement should be designed in alignment with the recommendations of this report. Priorities should be a product of learner engagement and there should be recognition of the mutual learning benefits of these relationships.

Addressing the pitfalls of short-termism (R 18)

Further thought should be given to ways in which those bidding for funds be required to address strategic issues, not just short-term tactical imperatives. Recent developments such as the commitment to three year budgets for schools in the New Relationship with Schools and to four year plans for Specialist Schools are a welcome start.

Countering the amnesia of the present (R 19)

Those responsible for contributing towards the formulation of new policy within the DfES should actively ensure that past eras and initiatives are treated respectfully and imaginatively and develop systems that minimise the dangers of too blanket or too swift a dismissal.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (RR615) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.