

FULL PRACTITIONER ENQUIRY REPORT

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# Walk the Walk, Talk the Talk

This study considers the impact of the Learning Walk upon effective school self-evaluation

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## The starting point

I was previously headteacher of Broad Oak Primary School which is situated on the outskirts of Preston, a large industrial town in Lancashire. It falls within a challenging socio-economic ward, reflected in the 31.5 per cent free school meals, 28 per cent special educational needs and 3 per cent statemented pupils on roll. Detailed analysis of the pupil's ability on entry revealed a large proportion of pupils with linguistically and numerically deprived backgrounds. In 1998, Broad Oak was one of the original Beacon schools in recognition of "excellent SAT results in 1997 and 1998 particularly when compared to the schools background statistics, described above, and their huge improvement on pre-1997 results".

In 2001, the school had an excellent Ofsted inspection with amongst its many strengths, the quality and quantity of the self-evaluation techniques being highlighted.

Throughout the years 1998–2001 as a Beacon school we were able to utilise a reciprocal partnership self-evaluation strategy entitled Heads You Win involving schools from across the UK. Details of this project are discussed later. It was a prototype and forerunner to the Learning Walk scheme researched in this document.

This started my original interest in this type of internal self-evaluative process based upon host headteachers driving the strategy as an enquiry process with fellow headteacher colleagues acting as 'critical friends'.

Since leaving Broad Oak I have moved onto my second headship; a very large 500 pupil primary school in Lancashire. I have also been a member of the DfES Best Practice Research Scholarship selection panel and was involved in the planning of the North West CPD conference – the launch of the National CPD initiative. This experience furthered my involvement and interest in a project that promotes the sharing of good practice, enhances self-evaluation and identifies targets for school improvements: the Learning Walk.

My original chosen title for this research was 'Schools can Speak for Themselves', based upon a piece of work discussing self-evaluation techniques; *Schools must Speak for Themselves* by John MacBeath (1999).

All of the factors described above influenced and directed my original interest and contributed towards the evolution of my hypothesis discussed in this report.

## Planning the journey

This study has been undertaken as part of the NCSL Research Associate Programme, spread over 30 days throughout 2003.

My original intention was to ascertain whether the structured Learning Walk was a viable replacement for/addition to/element of the current Ofsted framework. This was then tested against my chosen case-study group of schools.

The case study group of schools is WRIST (West Ribble In-service Training): an NCSL Networked Learning Community. This is a group of schools geographically closely related in the area south of Preston. It is a collection of varied schools, including small, medium and very large primaries; community, Catholic and Church of England maintained; urban, rural and semi-rural. My own school is a member of this group of 17 schools and I am currently the chair.

The group has recently embarked upon the use of the Learning Walk and was at an ideal stage in the development of this strategy to support this enquiry. This first stage of my research was based upon face-to-face interviews with headteachers involved in this process and analysis of written feedback reports of completed Learning Walks.

This original interview centred upon the following questions:

- Having been one of the original schools to host a Learning Walk last term, reflecting now, how would you describe the experience?
- In specific terms do you feel that there were benefits from the outcomes of the Learning Walk in relation to your own school's self-evaluation processes? If yes, could you identify these benefits?
- Were there any negative effects of the Learning Walk?
- Could you detail any outcomes of the Learning Walk that had an effect in terms of school improvement?
- Did the Learning Walk outcomes have any impact upon learning and teaching?
- Do you feel that the Learning Walk scheme can impact upon the traditional Ofsted system? If yes, in what ways?
- Would, in your opinion, the Learning Walk be a viable option to an Ofsted inspection?
- Are there any ways in which the Learning Walk scheme can be refined and/or improved to produce greater impact and benefits?

At the end of this initial phase of the research, six headteacher colleagues had been interviewed and four feedback reports analysed. These findings led me to reassess my original enquiry statement. It was clear that all interviewees firmly held the belief that the Learning Walk scheme had huge benefits and impact upon their schools own self-evaluation strategies, but yet they all saw that there was still a need for an external verifying agency, all be it much slimmer and less intrusive and more bespoke than the present Ofsted model.

The evidence accumulated from the data generated by the case-study group produced a revised focus for my research, that is, can the Learning Walk scheme fulfil the needs of schools as the effective whole school self-evaluation tool required within a changing national educational climate towards fully self-evaluating schools? Furthermore, could the Learning Walk become embedded in schools delivering an impact upon the standard raising agenda, learning and teaching and be the vehicle to deliver a school's self-evaluative data required within the new Ofsted framework.

These new questions were then tested against the case-study data and the wider community of schools across the UK.

My next phase of research involved interviewing a further six headteachers on a face-to-face basis and two via a telephone interview. Adding this to five further feedback reports analysed, I was able to draw upon a greater range of evidence.

Interestingly, these additional meetings and reports produced descriptions of a variety of uses of the Learning Walk. I spent some time following up these deviations from the norm and cite examples later in the body of this research paper. Unfortunately, I didn't have the full time allocation to research these findings thoroughly, and there is the potential for a full-scale research enquiry looking into differing Learning Walk applications across the UK.

The headteachers interviewed and the reports received came from the north west, north east, east and west midlands and the south west of England and were carried out in the summer of 2003.

## The first steps

The journey along the Learning Walk began for me in 1999 when my school was involved in a reciprocal partnership model of self-evaluation.

Those first few tentative steps involved hosting groups of headteacher colleagues and, in turn, visiting their schools with an agreed common agenda. This early style of Learning Walk, carried out over one day, involved an initial background talk from the host headteacher, a guided tour and a free-to-roam tour, culminating in an initial feedback session. The visit was followed up with a collaboratively written very short report by the visiting headteachers, highlighting three areas of development for the host school. This school evaluation technique entitled Heads You Win was documented at the time in the TES.

The Learning Walk had its origin as the Partnered Walk Through in North America. There, school headteachers utilised a similar format with school leaders evaluating their organisations with a theoretical underpinning in nine principles of learning. This, the original prototype, has transformed into various guises now in use across the UK educational community.

The next step of this journey, towards a fuller understanding of the Learning Walk, centred upon our local Networked Learning Community who embarked upon utilising the Learning Walk as a self-evaluative, diagnostic evaluation tool.

The ultimate goal of this journey, of which this is a summary, was to determine the impact the Learning Walk can have on school improvement within the current climate shift towards greater school autonomy, professional trust and school self-evaluation.

Is this process of self-evaluation, based upon sharing good practice, the strategy to fulfil the needs of a new inspection regime which is based upon the school having an increased role in evaluation?

Is it also a way forward for schools within this current education climate of collaboration and collegiality?

Throughout the course of the past year, spent mapping the regionalised and national Learning Walk schemes, differing avenues of application of the original North American model have appeared. These routes have added an additional insight into the impact of the Learning Walk.

## The map

The interview and report analysis of school leaders involved in the Learning Walk process was carried out against a background of changing educational thinking about accountability:

... inspection designed so as to take account of the school's interests and self-evaluation'. (David Bell, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, March 2003)

... new regime which aims to give schools a bigger role in evaluating themselves in new light-touch inspections announced today by the Office for Standards in Education. (Michael Shaw, TES, January 2003)

'... schools need to collaborate in arranging peer observation and review. (David Milliband, January 2003)

This movement towards an arena of an increased role for school's own self-evaluation processes adds a dimensionality to the key research question of how the Learning Walk, as an enquiry tool, can meet the demands of schools.

This is reflected in *Schools Must Speak for Themselves*:

There is an emerging consensus and body of wisdom about what a healthy system of school evaluation looks like. Its primary goal is to help schools to maintain and improve through critical self-reflection. It is concerned to equip teachers with the know-how to evaluate (and improve) the quality of learning in their classrooms. (MacBeath, 1999)

This body of research provides a conceptual framework against which self-evaluation strategies such as the Learning Walk can be assessed:

- purpose is clear
- focus is on priorities
- context sensitive
- economical but powerful
- brings elements together into a coherent whole
- user friendly
- inclusive
- flexible, accommodates change
- model of how rather than what
- provides tools for the job
- outcomes can be discussed
- action orientated
- leads to individual and school improvement

## **En route to an answer**

Our Networked Learning Community is an eclectic mix of primary schools all different in size, character, landscape and ethos. The community began using the Learning Walk as a self-evaluation process in 2002. The approach embedded the principles within a celebratory and manageable context. Individual schools hosted a visit from three headteacher colleagues. An initial discussion was followed by a whole school walk-through concluding with a shared discussion highlighting three areas for development and three celebrations of the achievements of the host school. A follow-up report to the host headteacher identifying these concluded the overall process. This co-enquiry approach enabled a professional dialogue to develop with the sharing of solutions to those developmental areas which had been identified. The age-old adage that someone out there has faced similar issues and found a contextual solution still applies.

Key themes emerged from evaluating the outcomes of these Learning Walks as noted below. The key outcomes have been grouped into generic thematic areas and generalise the essential ingredients required for a successful Learning Walk and the positive impact areas are also identified.

### **Pre-walk-through criteria**

- Agreed protocols and agenda before the visit ensues are vital.
- Trust, confidentiality and consistency of approach must be embedded.
- Pro forma/evaluation sheet must be consistently applied. It needs to be supplied before the visit.
- Host headteacher to identify areas for evaluation.

### **During the walk-through**

- Professional rigour is needed.
- Robust and positive experience must be created.
- First visit must be a positive experience. Ethos and environment factors in initial visit must be considered, then move onto more challenging learning and teaching areas in follow-up process.
- Share good practice – it must be a culture of collaboration.

### **Post walk-through**

- Support and challenge in feedback process in-built.
- 'Fresh pair of eyes' approach.
- Three celebrations and three areas for development need to be identified.
- Governor involvement is essential.
- 'Thought-shower' solutions to problems in feedback session.

### **Overall process**

- Must be built into school's own self-evaluation-cycle.
- Follow-up visit must be no later than two terms on. Continuity is vital.
- Must involve the whole school.
- Impact upon standards agenda, eg one school focused upon achievement and attainment in science at Key Stage 2.



Three common areas that were important to the outcomes of the Learning Walk emerged from the interview and report analysis processes.

### **Impact areas**

- Under the current and future external environment it was felt that the Learning Walk fulfils the school's self-evaluation needs, but there still needed to be a "verifying external agency", eg a very slimmed down bespoke Ofsted model producing a 'light touch' for schools fully involved in these processes.
- A noted spin-off from the walk-through model is a reduction or break-down of the competitive and suspicious atmosphere that can exist amongst geographically local schools.
- A training element is essential to the success of the whole scheme especially in relation to the feedback processes.

## The end in sight

The overriding element in the interview discussions was that school leaders found the Learning Walk process a positive, enhancing and productive one.

- ...supportive yet challenging.
- ...a model of shared good practice.
- ...within a culture of collaboration.
- ...challenge can be increased through time.
- ... critical peer-to-peer support.
- ... doesn't take six months to recover and the school doesn't lose momentum.

School leaders found the day's agenda developed an excellent experience of peer evaluation that easily embedded within their own internal structures. Discussion also centred on the need for pre-conditions to be established. Agreed protocols, trust, confidentiality and clear expectations are essential for the day to be a success.

Within the day itself it was felt that discussion throughout the walk, and particularly in the discussions afterwards, conducted within an atmosphere of professional rigour, provided the host with challenge, support and an opportunity to problem-solve with colleagues who were bringing a high level of credibility to these feedback sessions.

A short, concise written feedback report on the visit highlighted the areas for development and celebration, delivered within the following week, enabled the host school to reflect and develop a written action plan which, in turn, was sent to participating colleagues.

A follow-up day within the next two terms enabled this to become a cyclic, continuous system with the ongoing benefits of the input remaining current and relevant to the host school's ever-changing environment.

The overall process reflects the mantra of Anthony Alvarado, Chancellor of Instruction, San Diego Unified School District, "the best solutions come from groups of skilled practitioners working together".

Discussion also identified the need for a pre-established set of principles against which to evaluate findings similar to the original North American model or for a contextual set of school-based expectations. Many of the schools visited are favouring the latter, developing their own quality standards of the ideal lesson, classroom environment, behaviour standards, relationships and pastoral care. These guidelines being developed at staff meeting discussions are based upon the school's individual and unique ethos.

A requirement noted by all school leaders was the need for training in the aspect of delivering feedback; an element by which the whole process can stand or fall. As these types of self-evaluative, peer-to-peer techniques become established, it is clear that giving concise accurate, proactive feedback to fellow colleagues is going to be an essential part of the headteacher's toolkit.

## **A slight detour**

During this journey through the landscape of the Learning Walking scheme, a myriad of adapted approaches was discovered. The basic set of Learning Walk principles already described are being utilised in many areas around the UK for various problem-solving and evaluative purposes.

An example of this is the Lancashire Advisory Service research project. This project explores practice in primary schools in East Lancashire, “to gain evidence about the strategies used by schools to prepare children to live in a culturally diverse society, to promote race equality and to counter racist attitudes and behaviour”. It was established as a result of events that took place in this region in the summer of 2002, utilising “...a joint ‘walkthrough’ approach...adapted and developed to collect research information”.

This Lancashire approach to the Learning Walk was based upon a common format highlighting a whole-school approach, diversity, training, curriculum, teaching and inclusivity. The key focus areas of attitudes, environment, curriculum and teaching were observed. These Learning Walk findings were then incorporated into the final report that established recommendations for schools and the LEA.

Further examples of the development of the Learning Walk are included in NCSL’s pilot programme for small primary schools and the Networked Learning Communities project. Both of these groups are moving forward the development of the Learning Walk as a self-evaluative tool.

## The journey's end

The final destination reveals a scheme that has produced a fully self-evaluative process, able to be adapted by schools to match their contextual circumstances and ethos.

The benefits of the Learning Walk identified by school leaders utilising this approach are predominantly:

### Positive impact indications

- a robust and positive experience
- high challenge and support embedded
- opportunity to share good practice
- integral to school's own self-evaluation cycle
- positive experience for all staff
- ongoing with built-in feedback
- problem-solving opportunities from feedback sessions
- high credibility for 'fresh pair of eyes'
- host school central to process
- low cost, high output
- a cyclic, continual system, not a one-off
- reduction in an adversarial approach

An unexpected yet very welcomed positive spin-off highlighted by participants in the scheme included a reduction in the suspicion and competition that can exist amongst geographically local schools as joint visits and evaluations increased.

The high output and low cost nature of a system producing an extensive health check is also a major plus at this current time.

The journey of the Learning Walk has been a productive, successful and high impact one with its future travels looking to be extremely busy.

Headteachers and schools have found a great deal that is positive in this approach. The Learning Walk has credibility since it is carried out by fellow headteacher colleagues who are seen by the host headteacher as working within the school system on a day-to-day basis facing the same problems and issues as themselves. The process can be carried out over a day with little disruption to the life of the school and can readily be embedded as an ongoing strategy that is integral to the host school's self-evaluation cycle.

It is a self-evaluation process that is seen to be of low cost not only in financial terms but also in time, energy and staff physical wellbeing. However, it has a very high output in that areas for development are identified and fed back almost immediately.

Additionally, there is the positive group enquiry process of brainstorming solutions to the identified issues with the visiting fellow headteacher colleagues. This co-enquiry approach provides a unique opportunity to share good practice between four schools. A beneficial impact created is a reduction of an adversarial approach sometimes found between geographically local schools. The Learning Walk is carried out on a reciprocal basis. Therefore, interaction between the four or more schools increases through time producing effective network learning.

With appropriate protocols established relating to confidentiality, feedback and commonality of format, all headteachers found the Learning Walk a robust and positive experience with high challenge central to the process.

All agreed that the establishment of uniform procedures and protocols was an essential prerequisite for a successful day and also found the professional vigour utilised made this a challenging and valid strategy. The support provided at the feedback sessions and the areas for celebration also identified meant that this was a positive experience for the host headteacher, staff and school as a whole.

The cyclic, continual nature of the system meant that this was not a one-off snapshot of pre-prepared school life based on external criteria. The Learning Walk gave a view of everyday school-life focused upon the host school's development needs and issues.

These research findings provide an opportunity to view our evaluative approaches from a new dimension. All headteachers had a belief that the Learning Walk scheme could be embedded in their schools and produce evaluative outcomes that would identify development needs that would impact positively upon learning and teaching and input into their standards raising processes. The high quality self-evaluative evidence produced would also serve to fulfil the requirements of a changing external climate centred more on trusting schools own professional judgement.

All schools felt that with a comprehensive, challenging and supporting process such as this in place, a verifying, external input was still required but on a much slimmed-down, bespoke basis – an external audit that is based upon the school's issues and needs as identified in the Learning Walk process.

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