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Issues of ICT, School Reform and Learning-Centred School Design

Schools need to become more tightly coupled, intentional learning organisations focused on the core business of schools – teaching and learning – within which ICT is an important and significant element.

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Drivers for ICT in education

Technology has revolutionised the way we work and is now set to transform education. Children cannot be effective in tomorrow's world if they are trained in yesterday's skills. Nor should teachers be denied the tools that other professionals take for granted.
(Tony Blair, 1997)

The investment in the implementation of ICT in education in England has been significant. There have been many successes, but little systemic impact has been made in transforming the teaching and learning environments of individual classrooms. The reasons for this are complex and manifold and reflect experiences around the globe in issues of school reform and improvement.

There is no doubt that schools carry with them a fear – fuelled by the media, ICT multi-nationals and parents – that if they do not keep up with the traffic on the Infobahn, then they will be failing in their duties as educational institutions. There is some truth in this. Undoubtedly, if schools are to effectively educate young people to take their place in the 21st century, then they must provide an education that incorporates ICT. Furthermore, they must provide a critical ICT literacy that trains students in how to effectively determine the appropriate technology to use and when (or when not) to use it. Globally, mandated imperatives enshrine the centrality of ICT in schools, in curriculum and in pedagogy.

School reform and school design

The complex matrix of reasons that appear to inhibit reform of English schools is not unique. The history of school reform is dogged with similar stories of government and private initiatives foundering as a result of similar issues and challenges (see for example Caldwell, 1997 and Gipson, 2001). Consistent among the criticisms levelled at reforms linked with ICT in England has been the belief that too much emphasis has been placed on the numbers of computers in schools and on notions of connectivity. Too little emphasis has been placed on issues of teaching and learning.

Yet ICT is simply one of many reform drivers. It is also only one of the many expectations and demands that have been made of schools. Indeed the perceived decline over the last 20 years of the Church, neighbourhood and family, has led to the expectation that schools take on more responsibilities and

adopt a more holistic approach to education, embracing the social, spiritual, pastoral and moral dimensions. This in addition, of course, to their continued focus on academic achievement.

School change, school reform, has been likened to redesigning a jumbo jet in flight, or changing the wheel on a moving car (Dimmock and O'Donoghue, 1997). So how can real change and sustainable reform be effected? It is true to say that many attempts at reform have been top-down driven, dictated by policy makers at the highest level, and as a result they seldom make an impact in the classroom itself. The current context in England reflects this. What is needed is a methodology which anchors concepts of efficiency and effectiveness in classrooms with teachers, yet which provides a set of generic principles that accommodates the unique contexts and cultures of individual schools.

Arguably, too, there is a real need to develop quality education that provides a more personalised education for all students regardless of ability, one that specifically and professionally addresses their learning histories, intellectual characteristics and learning style preferences (Bain, 1996). In order for this to occur, schools need to become more focused as learning organisations – more tightly coupled, intentional and professional places.

Learning-centred school design

The term 'design' implies a deliberate strategic intention to craft – using a set of tenets or principles – a plan or blueprint for changing the various interdependent elements that make up a school with the purpose of achieving school improvement aims and objectives. Thus defined, the concept has a number of attractions. First, unlike the term restructuring, 'design' explicitly involves principles or tenets as guides for ensuring coherence. Secondly, there is deliberate intent to arrange the organisation so that it achieves certain desired improvement goals. Thirdly, the term implies a degree of coherence and interdependence between the different elements that go to make up the school. In short, 'design' has connotations of a more intentional and sophisticated process to re-shape schools according to a set of principles, which includes a knowledge base of 'what works', 'best practice', or, preferably, 'informed practice' (Dimmock, 2002, p.2).

Dimmock suggests that it is possible to describe generic principles or tenets that underpin this notion of school design, all of which seek to address the complex and highly ambiguous, loosely-coupled cultures of schools. At the core of the learning-centred school are the twin assumptions that:

. . . first, students of all abilities deserve a more individualised education, one that specifically addresses their achievement histories, intellectual characteristics and learning style preferences; and second, that a school needs to be more tightly coupled as a professional learning organisation. (Dimmock, 2000, pp. 276-7)

All activities and structures of the school, from curricular to administrative, are then referenced back to these assumptions.

The key questions should always be, how do actions or structures advance the individual learning achievements of students, and how do actions serve the process of teaching and learning?

The learning-centred school involves the close connection and articulation of:

- outcomes-driven, differentiated curriculum and teaching materials integrated with informed teaching practice

- teachers working in teams

- technology embedded in all aspects of school activity

- physical space configured to permit diversity of pedagogical strategy and activity

- clearly articulated position descriptions for all staff

- administrators as instructional leaders

- systematic and continuing professional development of teachers (Dimmock, 2002, pp276-7)

These principles of learning-centred school design may provide opportunities for a 'third way' in assisting schools to address the drivers for change and reform.

The predictable systemic failure of the implementation of ICT in schools as a means of transforming education resides in a complex matrix of competing and conflicting issues from teacher shortage, to limited professional development, to access and connectivity. It is evident, however, that despite the millions ploughed into the initiative, little impact has been made systemically on transforming teaching and learning in classrooms across the country. Arguably, despite the rhetoric and the investment in ICT and in associated professional development, insufficient strategic attention has been given to referencing these reforms to the core focus of teaching and learning. Further, only limited attention has been given to re-engineering schools to maximise the opportunities that ICT promises and which have been experienced elsewhere.

Certainly, there have been enormous strides in the last five years in terms of internet connectivity. Initiatives abound at governmental, LEA and school level ensuring that teachers, students and their families have increasing opportunity of access to ICT. Nonetheless, the majority of these initiatives simply graft the technologies onto existing practice.

Learning-centred school design will not solve issues such as teacher shortages, nor will it provide immediate resolution of inconsistent equity of access or connectivity. What it may provide, is a much more strategic approach to raising the quality of educational provision. The role of ICT in transforming education must consequently be seen in its context as simply one of the constituent elements of effective school design. It should not be the driver of change, but one aspect of an approach to education that provides enhanced opportunities to serve its core processes: teaching and learning.

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