NCSL National College for School Leadership

Research Associate Summary Report

Ann Marie Dimeck, Headteacher, Holy Rosary Catholic Primary School, Merseyside

Improvement through evaluation

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

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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 through uncovering this practice, highlight the implications for school leaders.

Methods

Five primary schools and one secondary school were selected for the study visits. Their location, intake and size varied; two were Beacon schools and the other four had been identified by their local authority as sharing good practice in self-evaluation. All the schools had strong and robust monitoring and evaluation systems.

Semi-structured interviews took place with the schools' headteachers based on the following questions:

- What processes do you use to evaluate the work of the school?

- Do these identify what you need to do to bring about improvement?

- What factors contribute to success?

- What factors inhibit success?

Processes used by the schools

The six 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'

The last process focuses not only on what the school teaches, and how it teaches but also the kind of place it is. The importance of this culturally-oriented monitoring was summed by one of the headteachers interviewed as:

The purpose of self-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 and learning, confidence etc which in the long term it believes will raise standards.

Headteacher

Three case studies of school self–evaluation leading to improvement

Case A: engaging pupil perspectives

In one school, the headteacher was eager to move beyond a pupil voice heard at its school council to a voice for learning. This was not easy for the school as it didn't have a model for involving children in evaluating their learning. For some teachers, it was a threatening concept with comments such as, "there could be a danger" and "this could run away from you".

However, the headteacher found that there has been no abuse of this permission by the children:

They run ahead in front of you and then come back to meet you.
Headteacher

Staff needed to feel confident in the process as one that would prove constructive. The headteacher's approach was therefore to grow the model gradually. She didn't say, "this is what we will all do", but acknowledged there were enough staff who were really passionate about it to trial it for a year. Other staff then saw the effect of the model and willingly came on board.

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 – I spend all night preparing that and [the pupils] didn't get it".
Headteacher

The school used learning conversations, a process that enabled the school to identify need through dialogue in which both parties listened. These conversations, initially brokered by an educational psychologist, would enable children to evaluate their lessons either verbally or in writing and would provide comments such as "I can't learn like that", or would offer responses in relation to how they might present their work. The children were included in self-evaluation; it wasn't done to them. The conversations very quickly became a natural part of everyday school life.

If children are given this respect and confidence about themselves it feeds into how they perform.
Headteacher

This led to children becoming more mature and confident in having conversations with adults 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.

Case B: improving consistency

Lack of consistency was identified by development teams in another primary school. These teams, established across the school to include all teachers, aimed to enable direct involvement in the self-evaluation process. The teams used the six processes cited earlier to reach judgements about what was not working well and to put in place an action plan that led to improvements in pupils' progress and achievement. The action plan identified all aspects of the curriculum – in this case the subject was maths – in which there were inconsistent practices, for example, curriculum planning, use of resources, time allocation, assessment and expectations. It is resonant of NCSL's research study on addressing within-school variation (NCSL, 2005b) in which schools took very specific steps to reduce variation between pupil outcomes.

Case C: evaluating values

A secondary school in the study strongly believed that school improvement priorities should be based in the first instance on an evaluation of the school's aims and values. This was achieved as follows.

- The headteacher, senior leadership team and middle leaders collected 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.

Trust and a sense of self-belief are central to the school's philosophy.

People have got to believe things will get better to have any chance of success.
Headteacher

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

Improvement priorities directed at self-esteem and respect are bearing fruit.
Ofsted, 2004

Factors that contribute to success

Factors that were felt to contribute to the success of self-evaluation processes 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 agenda 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 identifying improvement actions from these?

- What structures (eg team-based approaches) will support this?

References

NCSL, 2005a, *Self Evaluation: A guide for school leaders*, Nottingham, NCSL

NCSL, 2005b, *Narrowing the Gap: Reducing within-school variation in pupil outcomes*, Nottingham, NCSL

Acknowledgements

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