



Critical facilitators: External supports for self-evaluation and improvement in schools



Shivaun O'Brien, Gerry McNamara, Joe O'Hara *

Centre for Educational Evaluation, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 February 2014

Received in revised form 19 August 2014

Accepted 22 August 2014

Available online 23 September 2014

Keywords:

Facilitator

Facilitator-led

Critical friend

Critical facilitator

External support for self-evaluation

Evaluation capacity building (ECB)

ABSTRACT

This paper explores approaches used to support schools to engage in self-evaluation for the purpose of improvement. General models of support are outlined which emphasise evaluation capacity building however the usefulness of this approach is questioned. Instead the role of the critical friend as a provider of external professional support is explored. An approach which emphasises facilitation and the engagement of an external professional to lead self-evaluation processes in schools is suggested with a view to making the process 'easier' and more 'useful'. Research in relation to such an approach carried out in a range of educational contexts is presented. Implementation issues which will have relevance for schools, and for self-evaluation policy and practice in other jurisdictions are outlined.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Currently, the vast majority of OECD countries have legal requirements in place for schools to conduct self-evaluation. As school engagement in self-evaluation continues to expand, countries are adopting various approaches to supporting such processes in schools and to building capacity for evaluation. There is a greater focus on measuring educational outcomes for students through the use of standardised testing and the use of this data as evidence within the school self-evaluation process. However, the OECD (2013) highlights a common concern among countries in relation to variation in the capacity of schools to engage in self-evaluation. The report provides examples of capacity and implementation issues in Austria, Czech Republic, Belgium, Norway and the Netherlands. A common problem in many countries is inconsistent levels of implementation across schools nationally.

This paper explores issues related to implementation and capacity for self-evaluation. With schools already facing difficulty in this regard, cutbacks and competing pressures within schools may result in a minimalist compliance approach which would not provide teachers with an optimal self-evaluation experience. As a result, the chances of engendering strong staff commitment to the

process may be limited. While much of the literature recommends the need to build evaluation capacity, it may be time to ask some fundamental questions, first: what do we really want from self-evaluation and second: how can we best support school self-evaluation in order to achieve this goal?

Issues of implementation and capacity

Meuret and Morlaix (2003)(p. 54) claim that there is some evidence that self-evaluation in schools may enhance school effectiveness and improvement but state that "it is more praised by policymakers than it is liked and really used by the schools". The majority of education systems that have requirements in place for school self-evaluation have an expectation that self-evaluations will be conducted on an annual basis. In reality, self-evaluation appears to occur less frequently than specified. The OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) in 2008 reports on the percentage of lower secondary teachers who confirm that self-evaluation occurs at least annually. In Ireland, only 11% of teachers surveyed reported that self-evaluation occurred annually. The figures for Portugal and Iceland are 19% and 31%, respectively (OECD, 2009). The low level of implementation may be due, in part, to a problem of capacity. McNamara and O'Hara (2012)(p. 90) claim that "the Irish Education system does not have the capacity to generate the type of data necessary to create the robust model of self-evaluation clearly envisaged in the official documentation". Questioning the rhetoric reality gap

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +353 1 7005351.
E-mail address: Joe.ohara@dcu.ie (J. O'Hara).

between self-evaluation policy and implementation their research suggests that inspectors see the emergence of capacity for self-evaluation in schools as “aspirational”. Scepticism on the part of principals in relation to the ability of the system to deliver on self-evaluation is highlighted by [McNamara and O'Hara \(2012\)](#). Acknowledging the ‘decimation’ of school middle management as a result of cutbacks they claim that:

schools will prioritise the essential tasks rather than those considered to be optional. In this context any movement towards the development of a robust culture of self-evaluation is likely to be faced by a range of significant structural obstacles. ([McNamara & O'Hara, 2012, p. 95](#)).

[Hislop \(2013\)](#)(p. 16), Chief Inspector at the Department of Education and Skills acknowledges that with regard to engagement in self-evaluation in Ireland the “biggest challenges lie in the area of capacity”. He claims that the lack of data capture system in Ireland is due to insufficient investment by the government in the context of ongoing decreases in public expenditure. The current lack of support provided to schools in Ireland has a direct impact on capacity to successfully engage in a self-evaluation process. Ireland is not alone in this regard.

In most schooling systems, self-evaluation and other improvement processes appear to be built-on rather than built-in to the accepted core business of a school community. The practicalities associated with the self-evaluation process continue to be a challenge. [Ryan, Chandler, and Samuels \(2007\)](#) suggest that those promoting self-evaluation in schools should pay attention to the realities of schooling and to be more realistic about expectations for evaluation. They acknowledge that planning and implementing self-evaluation is multi-faceted and requires “considerable expertise”. In their study they found that novice evaluators experienced “significant challenges with the conceptual or technical evaluation aspects such as: evaluator role, instruments design, and the dissemination and utilisation of results suggesting ‘evaluation knowledge deficits’ ([Ryan et al., 2007, p. 206](#)).

Research carried out by [Schildkamp & Visscher \(2009, p. 158\)](#) show that schools “find it difficult to develop their instrumental and conceptual use of school self-evaluation results” on their own. The focus on student achievement, as part of the No Child Left Behind policy in the United States of America, has forced schools to become more data driven which has led to “more data than schools can reasonably manage” ([Huffman, Lawrenz, Thomas, & Clarkson, 2006, p. 74](#)). Research by [Vanhoof, Van Petegem, and De Maeyer \(2009\)](#) into attitudes towards school self-evaluation claim that the usefulness of both the process and outcomes of self-evaluation is recognised, but that it is the nature of the activities involved in the process that is off-putting together with the perception that it is time consuming and difficult to carry out. Similarly, research by [Blok, Slegers, and Karsten \(2008\)](#) suggest that schools are poor at performing adequate or rigorous forms of research for self-evaluation purposes. They find that difficulties occur for schools in relation to “formulating appropriate research questions, operationalising core concepts, selecting or constructing valid measurement instruments, analysing a large amount of data and formulating valid conclusions” (p. 393). [Blok et al. \(2008\)](#) conclude that school self-evaluation is a “very difficult task” for most schools and that they require external support over a period of years in order to build up their experience of school self-evaluations.

The provision of additional evaluation training for school teams is often recommended in research studies as the main solution to the problem ([Pang, 2003; Ryan et al., 2007; Cheng, 2011; Schildkamp, Vanhoof, van Petegem, & Visscher 2012](#)). While this may appear to be an obvious solution it raises the question, ‘What do we really want from self-evaluation?’ Do teachers really need to

become experts in self-evaluation in order for them to engage fully in a useful process that would improve the quality of teaching and learning? Self-evaluation is not an end in itself. Therefore, it may be more useful for those charged with supporting school self-evaluation, to make the process of self-evaluation easier to implement, particularly the stages that involve the review of evidence, analysis and action planning, so that those involved can move more efficiently to the implementation of actions that lead to improvements. If teachers are to develop “considerable expertise” then it should be in the implementation of high quality teaching and learning experiences rather than in self-evaluation itself.

But how is school self-evaluation supported? This paper explores general approaches to building self-evaluation capacity within schools and then examines approaches which involve the provision of external professional support in the form of critical friends and facilitators.

Building capacity for self-evaluation in schools

[Naccarella et al. \(2007\)](#)(p. 235) describe evaluation capacity building as “equipping staff within organisations with the appropriate skills to conduct rigorous evaluations in a routine, ongoing fashion”. They outline five methods used to build evaluation capacity within organisations as follows: provision of user-friendly manuals; provision of on-site and telephone technical assistance including provision of data analysis; provision of training workshops; provision of training of trainers; and provision of interactive web-based systems to guide evaluation design, data collection, data entry and analysis. Various support are provided across OECD countries, the most common being the provision of training for self-evaluation and other supports include: frameworks and models of self-evaluation, the clarification of areas to be addressed by self-evaluation; provision of reference standards or criteria to assist in the evaluation of educational processes and outcomes; and information systems to assist schools in comparing the results of national examinations, assessments and standardised tests ([OECD, 2013](#)).

In Ireland, for example, school self-evaluation is supported by the establishment of clear and prescribed expectations in terms of the focus and frequency of self-evaluation, a simple self-evaluation process, improved guidelines and tools, the provision of training by the inspectorate and members of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and an inspection process that encourages schools to engage in self-evaluation. While this level of support is an improvement on earlier attempts to support school self-evaluation in Ireland, school staff are still expected to find time to develop their own expertise and practice in relation to self-evaluation. The coordination of self-evaluation in schools is generally the responsibility of school principals and middle management. In order to organise such a process, coordinating staff would have to become familiar with the guidelines and requirements of the process, devise an inclusive and collaborative process to gather and analyse qualitative and quantitative evidence, develop data collection tools, make judgements, develop the self-evaluation report and the target focused improvement plan. Most importantly, following this work the action plans are to be implemented and progress monitored and recorded.

Evaluation capacity building (ECB) is a much researched field of study and has been described by [Stockdill, Baizerman, and Compton \(2002, p. 14\)](#) as “intentional work to continuously create and sustain overall organisational processes that make quality evaluation and its uses routine”. ECB practices generally involves the provision of training, technical assistance, consultation, and other activities to one or more staff within an organisation or system ([Suarez-Balcazar & Taylor-Ritzler, 2013](#)). With growing interest in ECB, [Bourgeois and Cousins \(2013\)](#) identify six key

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6849204>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6849204>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)