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An external change agent (ECA) was recently employed in three Queensland schools to align the school curriculum with the requirements of the state's high stakes test known as the Queensland Core Skills test (QCS). This paper reports on the teachers' perceptions of a change process led by an ECA. With the ever-increasing implementation of high stakes testing in Australian schools, teachers are under mounting pressure to produce 'results'. Therefore, in order to maximise their students' success in these tests, schools are altering their curricula to incorporate the test requirements. Rather than the traditional method of managing such curriculum change processes internally, there is a growing trend for principals to source external expertise in the form of ECAs. Although some academics, teachers, and much of the relevant literature, would regard such a practice as problematic, this study found that

Teachers' perceptions of the use of an external change agent in school curriculum change

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Abstract An external change agent (ECA) was recently employed in three Queensland schools to align the school curriculum with the requirements of the state's high stakes test known as the Queensland Core Skills test (QCS). This paper reports on the teachers' perceptions of a change process led by an ECA. With the ever-increasing implementation of high stakes testing in Australian schools, teachers are under mounting pressure to produce 'results'. Therefore, in order to maximise their students' success in these tests, schools are altering their curricula to incorporate the test requirements. Rather than the traditional method of managing such curriculum change processes internally, there is a growing trend for principals to source external expertise in the form of ECAs. Although some academics, teachers, and much of the relevant literature, would regard such a practice as problematic, this study found that in fact, teachers were quite open to externally led curriculum change, especially if they perceived the leader to be knowledgeable and creditable in this area.

Keywords accountability, curriculum change, external change agent, high stakes test

Introduction

For some principals, poor school performance on high stakes tests can have such an impact (McWilliam and Perry 2006), that they are attempting to risk-manage performance by ensuring that the test requirements are covered in their school's curriculum. In order to

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achieve this, some schools in Queensland are calling on the services of ECAs to assist with the process of curriculum change and realignment.

The current government-led agenda in Australia, of implementing high stakes standardised tests to raise the quality of education, is part of a worldwide phenomenon (Roellke and Rice 2009). In Australia, all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 sit for the national assessment of literacy and numeracy tests commonly referred to as NAPLAN tests. In Queensland, there is an additional Queensland Core Skills (QCS) test, undertaken by Year 12 students who wish to gain entry to University. The results from this test are combined with school-based assessment to give the student a University entry score. Such tests are being used to monitor the progress and performance of schools, students and teachers, and enjoy public support as a measure of teacher quality and student learning (Blanton, Sindelar and Correa 2007; Parkay 2006). In Queensland, school exit results have been published in the media for the last five years. This has put huge pressure on school personnel (Ward 2006) and has fed the public's insatiable appetite for school performance data in order to make basic comparisons. As a result, principals have become very aware of the need to risk-manage their schools against a poor performance. Cribb (2009) refers to the attention paid to institutional image in light of the weight attached to league tables, as pressure to 'impression manage' (p. 33).

One method principals have used to impression-manage/risk-manage the fallout from high stakes testing is to align their schools' curricula with the test requirements. In the state of Queensland, this means ensuring that the forty-nine common curriculum elements (CCEs) on which the QCS test is based are embedded in classroom practices. To facilitate this, some principals are now bypassing the traditional curriculum change management approach led by the deputy principal (curriculum), and employing ECAs to manage the process instead (Smeed 2008). However, many academics and teachers would see this as submitting to bureaucratic prescription, testing regimes and accountability measures; strategies that governments have used as part of their 'discourse of derision' (Hargreaves 2000, p. 168) to weaken the position of teachers, whom they see as obstructionist to authority's set agenda.

The core research question is: *How do teachers perceive the engagement of an external person to lead curriculum change in their school?* To examine this question, case study data from three schools in Queensland were analysed. These schools self-selected because one of the authors (a University lecturer) was employed as an ECA to adjust the curriculum to address the requirements of the state's high stakes exit test. To put the paper into context, literature related to the impact of high stakes testing, curriculum change and the

use of ECAs in education is discussed. Data from interviews with teachers from all three schools were examined, and participants' words were used to illustrate the teachers' perceptions of working with an external person. Furthermore, data were then analysed critically in relation to current literature on ECAs.

Impact of high stakes testing

A standardised test becomes high stakes when the results are used to make significant educational decisions. The results from high stakes tests are often published and are referred to by the public, systems and governments to make important assumptions and decisions about the quality and direction of education. Examples of significant educational decisions made on the basis of such testing are: whether to reward or sanction a school for its academic performance; funding allocations; student movement through the year levels; teacher competency; student enrolment; enrolment screening; and the narrowing and targeting of specific aspects of the curriculum.

The use of high stakes testing data has impacted at both classroom and whole school levels (Rowe 2000; Ward 2006). Perry and McWilliam (2007) promote the view that such an approach 'has led many schools to a reductionist view of education, one defined in terms of scores, market appeal and conformity' (p. 37). They argue that schools are becoming closed systems where externally determined outcomes become the focus of learning activities. Pinar (2004) identifies this external force as political. He states that an 'educational experience seems precisely what politicians do not want, as they insist on a test scores focus, as the "bottom line"' (p. 2). By linking the quality of education to students' performance on a standardised test, politicians have, in effect, taken control of what is to be taught in schools. As a result, one might well ask the following questions: Is the test no longer the instrument of assessment that informs the teacher and provides learning feedback to the students? Has it actually become the curriculum, and will high stakes testing continue to drive curriculum change (Smeed 2008)?

Curriculum change

Curriculum change is the act of performing an alteration to the knowledge and/or practices of a course to improve, correct, or remove perceived defects from what is being taught. In contrast to the continuity of a published syllabus, change, according to Luxon (2004), is

about movement. Therefore, it could be considered that there are two opposing forces at play in a curriculum change situation. Luxon suggests that educating individuals is a ‘process that is transformative’ (p. 483). On the other hand, he sees institutions such as schools as being concerned about ‘predictability and uniformity’ (p. 483), neither of which is conducive to transformation. This coming together of forces that are essentially in paradigmatic opposition is the area in which curriculum change operates.

Until the 1960s, minimal research was undertaken in this area (Fullan and Hargreaves 1991; Hirst 1968; Kerr 1968; Paechter 2003) and as a result, there was little understanding of the relationship between curriculum and change. Teachers would simply select ideas and implement them in ways they considered fair.

In recent decades, the increase in scholarly focus on the area of curriculum change has coincided with an increase in the pace and frequency of changes to the curriculum (McBeath 1995). Since the 1960s, the pace of curriculum change in many Western nations—such as the USA (Lieberman 1992), Australia (Smith and Lovat 2003) and New Zealand (Mansell 1999)—has both escalated and magnified (Lieberman 1992; Skilbeck 1998). This increase in school curriculum change has made some teachers reluctant to embrace ongoing reforms, as they find them incomprehensible and lacking in strategic and practical connections to their work (Malen and Rice 2009). To accommodate this reluctance, some principals are looking externally for assistance when undertaking a change process.

The practice of looking externally for assistance in change processes is traditionally linked with organisational change rather than specifically educational change. Organisational change, especially in large for-profit organisations, tends to be in response to demands from boards and shareholders who insist that performance improvement initiatives be dealt with in the short term (Leppitt 2006). An outcome of this has been that investment for continued growth can only be expected if a change activity directly correlates with increased revenue generation or margin. In essence, there have to be specific monetary gains from invested energy and finance. Organisational change theorists Schaffer and Thomson (1992) refer to ‘results-driven’ improvement programs that focus on achievement or specific, measurable operational improvement over a short period of time.

From an educational perspective, a results-driven program would hope to frame the curriculum in such a way that it maximises the chances of improving test scores. Such a change approach has received little attention from academics, who appear to continue to favour the established and recognised theories of educational change that validate a slow, considered, people-focused approach. However, the reality for many principals is that they

are on five-year contracts, and are expected to show an improvement in student and school performance within that timeframe; hence, the response in several cases has been to look externally for assistance.

ECAs in education

To implement a change process successfully, the leader needs to be people-oriented and be able to move others towards a stated goal (Booz Allen Hamilton 2004). However, according to Macdonald (2004), few teachers actually have the skills to facilitate a change process, and to give them this responsibility would inevitably be problematic. Fullan (2001) expects the trend towards an increasing volume and complexity of change to continue and, as a result, schools will at times find it necessary to look to ECAs for assistance.

Harris (2001) defines a change agent in education as one whose function is 'to prepare and organise the school for change' (p. 263). To manage a change process, it is important that the ECA exhibit specific skills. The skills identified in the literature include those needed in the roles of analyser and solution giver, recruiter, resource linker, catalyst, process helper and process controller.

As an analyst and solution giver in educational change, an ECA is often charged with the responsibility of interpreting visions, reviewing current situations in schools and establishing goals which will hopefully improve learning outcomes (Harris 2001). The role of a recruiter (Razik and Swanson 1995; Warren 1977) is not only to recruit participants willing to embrace the change effort, but also to encourage the resisters to join in. By employing an ECA to manage curriculum change, the principal establishes key links between their schools and important outside resources (Fullan 1991; Print 1993; Smith and Lovat 2003). As a catalyst for change (Smith and Lovat 2003), it is the responsibility of the ECA to act as a motivator and, at times, challenger during the process. Huberman and Miles (1984) and Smith and Lovat (2003) consider that as well as guiding the process, it is important that the ECA support the participants. Finally, as a controller (Razik and Swanson 1995) of the process, the change agent attempts to balance and share the control of the project with participants.

While the change agent assumes the authority necessary to initiate and manage a change process, eventually s/he will withdraw, leaving behind a culture that can sustain ongoing, substantive reform discourses (Goodman, Barron and Myers 2001). The above roles (analyser and solution giver, recruiter, resource linker, catalyst, process helper and process

controller) are important to undertake for an ECA managing curriculum change in schools. How teachers perceive these in relation to a curriculum change process is under consideration in this study.

Research method

In this qualitative case study, one of the authors (who was also the researcher) was employed by three high schools in Queensland, Australia, as an ECA with the aim of changing the curriculum in each school to meet the demands of high stakes testing. Two schools were metropolitan and one was regional. The enrolments ranged in size, with two having student populations of approximately 500 and the other, 700. Each of the schools was owned by a religious institute and governed by an independent board of directors. The day-to-day management of each school was the responsibility of the principal.

Even though the schools in the research study were independent, they relied substantially on funding from commonwealth and state governments (McWilliam and Perry 2006). They received additional finance from student fees and other sources of income that the school generates. To remain eligible for funding, the schools had to undertake specific accountability procedures (McWilliam and Perry 2006) that included gaining ‘Accreditation for Non-State Schools’ from the state government to operate within Queensland.

Though the schools were owned by religious institutes and governed by boards of directors, all three case study schools used the syllabuses of the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA). This is a statutory body of the Queensland Government, responsible for the provision of a range of curriculum services and materials relating to syllabuses, testing, assessment, moderation, certification, accreditation, vocational education, tertiary entrance and research.

The principals had contacted the ECA and asked for assistance in implementing curriculum change in their schools. None of the schools had previously worked with the change agent, but the three principals were aware of curriculum work she had done in her school just prior to taking on a role as a University lecturer in a Faculty of Education. At the time of engagement, all three principals were concerned about their school’s published performance data.

Relevant data for this study was obtained from interviews with two teachers in each of the three schools. The teachers are identified as A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2, to correspond with schools A, B and C. All were female, middle-aged and Caucasian. In Queensland, the

people responsible for implementing curriculum change in schools are Heads of Departments or middle managers. The six people interviewed in this research came from this level. They worked extensively with the ECA, realigning their curricula to meet the requirements of the QCS test. Professionally, they would be considered an experienced group of teachers, with time in the profession ranging from eight years (C1) to 20 years (A1).

Interviews with teachers were conducted at a neutral site within a four-week period. This qualitative method featuring semi-structured interviews occurred on a one-on-one basis and lasted 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Transcripts were read by four people, including the two authors, another academic, and a teacher in middle management in a school not involved in the change process. Each of the four worked independently to identify the teachers' perceptions of an externally-facilitated curriculum change process.

As previously stated, interviews were conducted by the researcher, who was the ECA and one of the authors. This may be perceived by some as a limitation of the research. However, in line with participative research as outlined by Denzin and Lincoln (1994), genuine collaboration was valued, by introducing two other people external to the research.

Several techniques were used by the researcher to limit bias. One of these techniques was *epoché*, or bracketing (Marton and Booth 1997). This involved the researcher standing back and attempting to 'bracket off' ideas and perceptions she had formed while implementing the change process. To further strengthen the confirmability, interview questions for both a pilot study and the final study were structured using input from both authors. Additionally, as both authors had had experience in the role of deputy principal in schools, they were familiar with the technique of '*disassociation*'. This occurs when a person distances him/herself from incidents while conducting an investigation. To further alleviate bias, Lincoln and Guba's (2002) technique of member checking was employed, to validate both the interview data and the researchers' analysis. This involved checking the interview transcripts, preliminary themes and interpretations with research participants.

While conducting the interviews, the researcher used specific interviewing techniques of paraphrasing, probing and summarising (Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran 2001) in order to manage the process of the interview, rather than becoming engaged in the content. Throughout the interview process, she was mindful of both interviewing ethics and the ethics of the study, particularly in relation to confidentiality. These were articulated strongly to the interviewees.

Finally, to further limit bias, interview data were analysed and themes established by four people in isolation. It was felt this was necessary to establish a strong degree of confirmability. Whilst it is unrealistic to presume an absence of all bias, many strategies were put into place to limit its occurrence, as this discussion shows.

Findings and discussion

In relation to the research question, '*How do teachers perceive the engagement of an external person to lead curriculum change in their school?*' key themes were identified using the method of category construction (Merriam 1998). Through this method, comparisons and connections were made from the interview data by isolating and categorising significant features, identifying cycles of cause and effect, and establishing relationships within the data. From this analysis, four key themes were established. These were: the importance of the ECA's knowledge, experience and credibility; the value of having an external person managing the change process; the importance of the ECA as a guide; and the ECA as a catalyst in creating a collaborative culture.

The importance of the ECA's knowledge, experience and credibility

Many authors agree that knowledge of both the subject and of change strategies is vital (Harris 2001). Additionally, the reputation of the ECA is also important (Fullan 1991). If an ECA has prior experience in curriculum change facilitation, Smith and Lovat (2003) suggest that this will greatly improve his/her chances of success. The teachers involved in this change process saw the knowledge, experience and credibility of the ECA as pivotal to the success of the process. B1 commented:

Because I had worked with you before, I knew it was going to be a worthwhile process. For me, that certainly added to it . . . you knew your stuff. You knew about curriculum . . . because I knew of your reputation—that made me think, yes, that's going to challenge me to think in another way. You knew your stuff, so it was worth my taking it on board and thinking carefully about it. (B1)

This comment shows how important it was that the ECA had extensive knowledge in curriculum and also a track record of successful change implementation within other

educational establishments. Teachers were 'on board' and wanted to be part of the process because they had the perception that it would be 'worthwhile'. Instead of being frustrated by the continuous demands of reform, they saw the expertise of the ECA as a 'door' to a more coordinated response; the kind of response that Macdonald (2004) considers to have been in disarray and floundering in the past. As said previously, teachers have been very reluctant to embrace ongoing reforms as they find them incomprehensible, and lacking in strategic and practical connections to their work (Malen and Rice 2009), but in this study the reluctance was minimal because of the ECA's knowledge, expertise and credibility. B2 commented:

You had a fair bit of credibility with me before we met, because I had heard about you operating. So in my head you had credibility because you were on the grand picture, as well as also being an academic. You're that combination of academic and practitioner which is very important to me. I personally think if you can't walk the walk, then don't talk the talk, because no one will listen. So I saw you as one of us, but also moving in higher circles, or other circles, parallel universes. And I think that to me that gave you a degree of professional credibility and therefore people were willing to follow you. (B2)

The ECA was perceived by the participants as having the knowledge, expertise and credibility to get the job done. Razik and Swanson (1995) refer to this as the role of a process controller.

The knowledge of the ECA was also perceived by teachers as a way of 'tapping into' current educational initiatives and thinking. The following comment acknowledges how teachers get 'bogged down' in daily procedures of school life, and neglect keeping up-to-date with new knowledge:

I think having expertise was essential. When you are a teacher in a school, you are aware that things are going wrong, but you never really get enough time to look and read and think about how those particular changes in educational trends come about. Because when you're teaching, you're in your own little school, your own environment, you got your day-to-day routines that you've got to get done as a teacher, so you need someone who has that understanding to come in. (C1)

In all schools, the ECA continually delivered professional development sessions on themes such as government agendas, accountability, school performance, and improving classroom practices through embedding changes into the curriculum. In addition, the ECA encouraged a reading group in school C where up-to-date academic articles were sent to teachers and a breakfast reading group was established. In this situation, Fullan (1991), Print (1993) and Smith and Lovat (2003) would see the role of the ECA as the resource linker. In relation to the reading group, one of the teachers commented:

I enjoyed the reading group. It made me realise that the things I do in the classroom are OK. I got lots of other ideas that I had never thought about before, so I could think, ah, that would be better if I added that in or took that out. I should probably try to make more time for professional reading. (C2)

Not only did teachers appreciate the ECA's currency of knowledge, they were reminded of the importance of their own professional development and considered factoring this into their time. Teachers reflected on their own practice in relation to other research and theories; therefore, the ECA was the catalyst or motivator (Smith and Lovat 2003) in the change.

In sum, the knowledge, expertise and credibility of the ECA were welcomed by staff. They saw the process as an opportunity for professional growth as well as for improved educational outcomes for their students.

The value of having an external person manage the process

Teachers were asked in interviews if they saw any value in bringing in an ECA to facilitate the change process. Their responses indicated that an effective outcome in less time was a major advantage. Comments such as the following were typical:

I thought it was excellent to have someone from outside brought into the school and intensely work with us, because it was very effective—rather than have a process that could have taken a couple of years. I thought it was really good to have somebody with your skills guide us and talk us through it, and do it quickly and possibly more effectively. (A2)

Again, in this situation the ECA took on the role of the resource linker (Fullan 1991; Print 1993; Smith and Lovat 2003). She brought knowledge and experience from the outside into the school in a fast and effective manner. The fact that the teachers valued a ‘fresh perspective’ from an external person was supported by the following comment:

When you’re in a school, you work within that school. If you don’t have some fresh perspective or some sort of outside influence coming in, you’re going to stay in your little cocoon, and you’re not going to expand as much as if you are being led by somebody from outside. (C2)

Not only did this teacher appear to value a ‘fresh perspective’, B2 also pointed out that they were in a position to accept or reject the advice offered by the ECA. She commented:

I see there is value in having someone external looking at what you are doing. I think with your expertise and your feedback, looking at the data and analysis, and then saying to staff and the Heads of Department, ‘these are the types of things you need to start thinking about implementing’, not coming out and saying ‘this is how you do it, this is what needs to be done and this is what you need to change’. Instead, there are strategies that you can put into place. The school doesn’t have to take your advice; they don’t have to use it. (B2)

The role of the ECA outlined by C2 and B2 is that of an analyst and solution giver (Harris 2001). Using the words of B2, the role that was undertaken was that of ‘someone outside looking at the system’ or analysing and giving advice (solution giver). What is also of interest in the above comment is that the teacher did not feel they were being told what to do. The ECA gave an opinion and then it was up to teachers as to how they would use that advice. In summary, teachers valued an external person, as time was saved in achieving an effective outcome, a fresh perspective was offered, and teachers were empowered to accept or reject the analysis and solutions given.

The importance of the ECA as a guide

Once a change process has been implemented, its likelihood of success is dependent upon the support and guidance received by staff during the process (Huberman and Miles 1984). Smith

and Lovat (2003) consider support of the participants as the role of a process helper. In this case study, teachers perceived the ECA as a guide; someone who would support and guide them through this change process. Teacher B1 commented:

I felt very supported as a Head of Department who was trying to bring about the change within my department. Sometimes it's really good to have the messages coming from people other than yourself. And it was affirming, because some of the messages I was trying to convey to my staff were backed up by the messages that you were passing on. And I really remember that session we had where we looked at the QCS data, and the way it engaged my staff, and the way it generated the conversations about what can we do differently. (B1)

The above quote relates to an activity in which the ECA was assisting teachers to unpack their test data. The ECA supported and guided the teachers in becoming assessment data literate. In order to provide quality support, it is helpful if the ECA tries to see things from the teacher's point of view and supports them when considering alternative viewpoints; thereby acting as a challenger or catalyst (Smith and Lovat 2003). Some teachers find being challenged very difficult, but Teacher A2 appreciated being put at ease in these circumstances. She commented:

To be quite honest, I think your whole manner was open, you were a very approachable person. I didn't know you before I met you, but your warmth, and the way you approached everybody I thought was a wonderful thing. So people didn't feel scared of you, or nervous to approach you, to ask for answers to questions in our ignorance, we didn't feel it would have been a put-down for us not to know anything. (A2)

In addition to supporting the participants and making them feel at ease, the ECA is also required to keep the momentum of the process going; to affirm and challenge the teachers in order to reach required goals (Smith and Lovat 2003). A1 commented:

I think it was really good that you spent so much time here, with people, with the various things, and you weren't just a voice on the other end of the phone, you were known to everybody. People were comfortable about you. They might have grumbled

about you that you were pushing too hard, but I think you've got to have someone to take that role on. (A1)

In this situation, the ECA guided teachers through the change process by being supportive and approachable (Smith and Lovat 2003). However, the response in the above quote from A1 also showed that even though teachers found the process quite challenging, and at times grumbled about the ECA, they acknowledged the need to be guided.

The ECA as a catalyst to create a collaborative culture

Successful change implementation relies on relationships (Fullan 1991). In the current study, this specifically refers to the ability of the ECA to form relationships with staff and amongst staff involved in the process (Smith and Lovat 2003). As previously mentioned, change agents must be people-oriented and capable of moving a team towards a common goal (Booz Allen Hamilton 2004). In effect, the ECA had to use her skills to create an effective collaborative culture. Teacher B2 commented on the ECA's relationship with staff:

I think you had a good relationship with staff. Therefore the staff was willing to be more helpful. (B2)

Additionally, C1 commented on the ECA's ability to get staff to work collaboratively:

I have never seen the staff work so well together. We have started lots of projects before but they always fizzle out. This time, we had direction. In the past, we knew where we wanted to take the school, but we never seemed to have the courage to follow through. (C1)

These comments show that during this change process, the ECA undertook the role of a recruiter (Razik and Swanson 1995; Warren 1977). She displayed the skills of being able to bring teachers together in a collaborative professional community; one that encouraged reflection and communication. A2 commented on both the ECA's ability to communicate and the teachers' reflective response to the process:

I thought it was really good to have somebody with those skills like yourself to guide us and work with us. We [the staff] also worked together and ran ideas past one another. The place was like a beehive, because you saw people going around chatting about what was going on. For the first time ever, people were using professional terms in conversation. It's not that I want to work with a pack of nerds and it's not that they spoke like that all the time, but when you [the ECA] started using technical terms, people thought about what you were saying and engaged in the process. They would think about things and then speak about what we were doing. You communicated beautifully with us, so I had no problems understanding you, or understanding what you needed or wanted. (A2)

In her response, A2 specifically commented on the ECA's ability to communicate and the staff reaction to the process in terms of reflecting and discussing. People engaged with one another as part of a collaborative learning community.

In response to the research question, '*How do teachers perceive the engagement of an external person to lead curriculum change in their school?*', data from interviews with six change participants were analysed and discussed according to four key themes. It was found that participants considered an ECA's knowledge, experience and credibility to be very important. They valued having an external person managing the change process; a process that saved time and had an effective outcome. A fresh perspective was recognised, and participants also appreciated being guided by a supportive and approachable person who challenged them where necessary. Lastly, the ability of the ECA to create a collaborative professional community encouraging reflection and communication was also seen as an advantage.

Conclusion

This paper has made comment on how the increasing pressures of accountability on schools are impacting on the curriculum, resulting in changes to accommodate the demands of high stakes testing. To do this, some principals are engaging ECAs to assist in risk-managing against poor results. The question of how teachers perceived this engagement of an external person to lead change in their schools is addressed in this paper. The overwhelming response from teachers was that if they were working with an ECA with knowledge, experience, credibility and the ability to support teachers in a collegial manner, they enjoyed the

involvement and were willing to engage in the change process. Therefore, ECAs should consider matching these characteristics if they are going to successfully implement change in schools. Moreover, principals who wish to engage the work of an ECA could use these attributes as selection criteria for employment. However, even though it was clear that the teachers saw the process positively, we raise a degree of caution. It has yet to be seen, under the current regime of accountability, whether or not such an externally led process will have the effect of de-professionalising teachers. Ongoing research into this as well as into the sustainability of the process, is recommended.

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