Judging the impact of leadership-development activities on school practice

Journal Item

Judging the Impact of Leadership-Development Activities on School Practice

by Nigel Bennett and Alan Marr

The nature and effectiveness of professional-development activities should be judged in a way that takes account of both the achievement of intended outcomes and the unintended consequences that may result. Our research project set out to create a robust approach that school staff members could use to assess the impact of professional-development programs on leadership and management practice without being constrained in this judgment by the stated aims of the program. In the process, we identified a number of factors and requirements relevant to a wider audience than that concerned with the development of leadership and management in England. Such an assessment has to rest upon a clear understanding of educational leadership, a clearly articulated model of practice, and a clear model of potential forms of impact. Such foundations, suitably adapted to the subject being addressed, are appropriate for assessing all teacher professional development.

The Context of the Study

In 1997, the British Government gave control of teachers' professional development in England to the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), the agency responsible for organizing initial teacher training. In doing so, they broke the virtual monopoly of continuing professional development (CPD) previously held by local education authorities (LEAs) and higher education. The agency introduced a competitive tendering system for CPD contracts, which was intended to drive down costs by creating a competitive market, create more central direction for CPD provision, and introduce a measure of quality control.

To be successful, a bid had to demonstrate clear procedures for assessing the "impact" of the course on "practice"—though neither term was defined. This requirement is easier to impose than to deliver. Is the assessment of course or program impact determined simply by the extent to which the *intended* outcomes are met, or should we allow for *unintended* outcomes? Do assessments include effects that may be observed in the practice of participants' colleagues, even if they are not found in the activities of the participants themselves? Can the assessment of impact be based on knowledge and understanding, or must it identify changes in participants' day-to-day actions? Is impact measured by evidence of the reinforcement of approaches and methods, or must there be some kind of change? This new emphasis, then, highlighted our lack of understanding of the nature of the impact of CPD courses and programs designed to foster professional development, which had previously been more a statement of faith than certainty.

The Impact on Practice of Programmes

of Leadership and Management Development (IMPPEL) project was established in late 1997 to explore the impact of leadership training on the practice of running subject departments in secondary schools (roughly equivalent to junior and senior high schools in North America). It set itself the ambitious task of seeking a straightforward and robust strategy through which teachers and school leaders might make sound judgments about the value of CPD activities. A pilot phase ran from late 1997 to late 1999; after changes in team membership, the second phase started in the spring of 2001. It is due to report in spring 2003.

The pilot phase surveyed providers or commissioners of leadership-related CPD to determine the nature and range of provision available. Interviews also were conducted with a structured sample of teachers who had recently experienced leadership-related CPD, with the colleagues whom they identified as key members of their role set, and with the teacher responsible for CPD (Bennett and Smith 2000a; 2000b).

The data from the second phase are now being analyzed. We interviewed a total of 90 secondary school teachers in 10 secondary schools, located in different LEAs representative of the different types that currently exist in England. The teachers interviewed in each school included:

- four heads of subject departments, whose CPD is the focus of the study;
- one teacher in each of their departments; and
- the senior teacher responsible for CPD.

We focused on the mathematics, sciences, and English departments, because these are "core" subjects in the English National Curriculum, and agreed that each school should also choose another subject of particular interest to them. Each school agreed to the creation of a case study report prior to beginning data analysis.

CONTEXTUAL INFLUENCES ON 'MIDDLE LEADERSHIP' CPD

Cross-case analysis suggests that contextual pressures influence the range of CPD opportunities available to subject leaders as well as how they understand their leadership role, what might be appropriate for their professional development, and how its impact might be justified.

First, teachers must keep up with the many central-government initiatives focused on school improvement, and affecting students throughout secondary education. This puts pressure on both staff time and school CPD resources.

Knowing about and implementing these initiatives creates a "deficit" model of CPD, usually delivered in short, "bite-sized" chunks rather than through extended programs. Tight school budgets create a second order "cascade" model, in which one teacher attends a day's course or briefing on the initiative and disseminates the new knowledge/information to colleagues. Professional development thus becomes focused on improving what might be called "active practice" rather than en-

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couraging reflective practice: indeed, the English Chief Inspector of School's annual lecture for 1999 was entitled "The Rise and Fall of the Reflective Practitioner" (Woodhead 1999).

Second, the introduction of a national performance-management scheme has affected the range and focus of CPD. This scheme takes place in the context of a formal school-development plan, and is thus a further extension of the technicist-rational organizational model (Bennett, Levacic, Crawford, Glover, and Earley 2000) that has come to dominate central-government thinking about schools and schooling. In particular, by linking the performance targets set for individual teachers to organizational priorities, and placing them on a relatively short-term annual basis, it de-emphasises longer-term personal development and tends to reinforce further the deficit model of CPD.

Consequently, most of the CPD programs that interviewees described were one-day or half-day sessions out of school, or twilight (after-school) activities undertaken "in-house." Most "in-house" sessions were "cascaded" dissemination activities run by colleagues whose expertise was often of a low-level technicist nature. Though Lawrence (1994) identified more than 60 master's degree programs in England and Wales that offered courses or modules in educational leadership and management, only two interviewees referred to such postgraduate management education as part of their CPD experience. Both worked at a school in which a very different approach was being taken to CPD from that found in the other schools visited. All the others talked only of one-day sessions.

Third, teacher recruitment and retention is extremely difficult, and the high cost of housing in the areas where our schools are located exacerbates the situation. Our case study schools were typically facing annual staff turnovers in excess of 25 percent. This turnover has created substantial demands for the induction of new staff members, including newly-qualified and, sometimes, unqualified teachers. Much of this work is carried on "in-house," but it carries a substantial cost, because schools must pay cover staff to create release time for the induction sessions. It also carries an opportunity cost in that supply teachers' salaries reduce the budget available to cover other staff members who may wish to go on other CPD courses. The Subject Leaders we interviewed repeatedly stated that wider circumstances prevented them from going on what they usually called management-training courses. One head of department stated that everything had to go "on hold" during the previous school year, as staffing difficulties meant that all his energies had to be devoted to keeping the teaching covered.

Finally, there are very wide variations in individual schools' CPD budgets. The government has created a centrally allocated CPD fund—the "standards fund"—much of which is set aside for specific training related to particular centrally determined school-improvement initiatives. At the same time, the government has transferred control of CPD budgets from LEAs to individual schools. Doing so has removed the subsidy on CPD costs that LEAs were formerly able to provide, and senior school staff members and governors now control CPD budgets. Consequently, professional development must compete with other demands for school resources, and how much is allocated will depend on senior managers' judgments about the importance attached to CPD.

One consequence of these developments is a heavy dependence on "modelling" as a basis for learning and professional development. Despite some support in the literature on both teacher learning

(Joyce and Showers 1995; Guskey 2000) and management learning (Mintzberg 1990), this approach assumes a degree of certainty about what is desirable behavior to model. We found a strong belief that the exercise of leadership should rest on demonstrating outstanding classroom practice, in the first instance through classroom observation. However, it was not clear where this belief came from, and only a small minority of respondents expressed concern that their sense of good practice required support and validation by some kind of additional external knowledge. These teachers feared that their personal development might become a process of acculturation into a localized and individualistic perception of practice that might not transfer easily into another organization.

Many of the subject leaders were unable to monitor their colleagues' classroom practice as often as they had either intended or thought necessary.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

These contextual developments appear to have shaped an understanding of leadership practice and a picture of professional development that together have implications for both the nature of CPD and the bases upon which its impact is judged. Most interviewees said that the central purpose of leadership was to demonstrate excellent practice so that the standard of work in their area of responsibility could be improved and satisfy the constant pressure for continuous improvement in student achievement. "Good leadership" is therefore epitomized by excellent classroom practice, allowing leaders to identify and set departmental goals. As a consequence, the subject leaders' primary stated activity was observing their colleagues teaching and also being observed. Here, again, modelling is the key vehicle through which they achieved their stated goals. However, because of the pressures outlined above concerning time and the induction of new staff members, many of the subject leaders were unable to monitor their colleagues' classroom practice as often as they had either intended or thought necessary.

Set alongside the performance-management policy referred to above, this approach expresses leadership as a semi-heroic, charismatic activity (Conger 1989), subordinating colleagues as conformist followers who replicate their leader's practice toward achievement goals and norms of practice created for them. It reflects the two sets of National Standards for Headteachers and Subject Leaders created by the TTA (1998a; 1998b), which form the basis of most leadership-related CPD. Bryman (1992) identified the key characteristics of this approach as requiring leaders to:

- create a vision or mission for their organization;
- infuse that sense of vision throughout it;
- motivate and inspire staff members toward achieving that vision;
- create change within the organization toward its achievement; and
- empower their staff toward that end, at the same time demanding staff commitment to the vision and stimulating extra effort from staff members.

This model requires leaders to be involved actively with their colleagues rather than remote from them; to act intuitively towards achieving their goals; and to be proactive rather than reactive. One subject leader clearly illustrated the approach:

> *The way I forced the issue was to ensure that the strategies were used in an assessed task—that everyone had to do—and I collected the marks from them, and I could check up I suppose. And when it went into the development plan, I said that if we were to achieve this aim then five things should happen—and I asked my team members to write down an action plan which would be their contribution to us reaching these five objectives. And then I could use that action plan six months later and say, "How far are you meeting these five (objectives)?"*

However, alongside this "leading from the front" expectation of conformity, we also observed one example of a collegial, reflective approach to leadership. These leaders did not lay claim to outstanding classroom practice: indeed, they saw their classroom practice as just as open to critique as that of their colleagues. Nor was their role one of laying down aims and objectives to follow. Rather, it addressed fostering the conditions in which reflection and discussion could take place—instituting the process of development that would lead to both goals and means being agreed to rather than imposed. This "leading from behind" view saw leadership as an organizational function being achieved through relationships rather than an activity being engaged in by an individual. It reflects constructivist views of leadership (Morley and Hosking 2003) and concepts derived from institutional theory (Ogawa and Bossert 1997; Ogawa 2003). Implicit in this view, though rarely expressed, was the possibility that the leadership role was mobile, shifting from one person in the team to another, depending on the issue, the circumstances, and the sense of each individual's expertise. Thus, one subject leader, commenting on the impact of her own CPD, stated, " It has made me far less judgmental—because it's far easier to see what that person in that role is trying to do even if I wouldn't do it like that myself."

This nonjudgmental approach to leadership and management is quite different in its perception of good practice and the direction in which individual action should go from that expressed in the first example. It sees both practice and direction as problematic, and it is difficult to associate with the competency / standards model derived from neo-charismatic leadership theory.

Four teachers also discussed how far leadership was an innate characteristic or could be taught. Some saw it as a set of skills or capacities that could be taught and, therefore, a role to which all could aspire, which causes us to question, again, what counts as "good" leadership practice. Others viewed it as a function of an individual's personality traits, reflecting a theory of leadership dating back to the 1950s (Horner 1997).

Clearly, an individual's conceptualization of leadership influences both his or her view of what leadership or management-related CPD can do and how it might do it. Many interviewees also felt that "good" leadership could vary according to circumstances and the nature of tasks involved. This expression of contingency theory (Fiedler 1967; House and Mitchell 1974; Goddard 2003) was reflected in the distinction made between bringing about superficial change and changing professional values. The former could be a process of simple demonstration and rational explanation; the latter was seen as involving persuasion, political skill, the development of trust, and creating new power relationships. Quite different skills were seen as involved in each activity, which led some interviewees to question the validity of generic leadership or management skills except at the most elementary level. Indeed,

many of our interviewees took contingency theory further; they were quick to state that "what works" for one person may not work for another in a similar setting.

Thus, we found diverse views about the nature of leadership. They leave us with different answers to the fundamental questions that must be addressed in leadership and management-development activities: how do we establish a perception of what is right or proper practice, and how do we increase an individual's capacity to deliver it in action?

LEARNING ABOUT LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

We identify in our data three distinct but interrelated elements of leadership and management practice: knowledge, action, and values. Following Eraut (1994) and Ryle (1949), we suggest a distinction between propositional and procedural knowledge. Propositional knowledge—knowledge of or knowledge that—defines the nature and scope of our work, while procedural knowledge—knowledge how—enables us to transform our propositional knowledge into concrete actions.

Eraut (1994) distinguished between explicit public knowledge and private knowledge. Private knowledge might be explicit, in which case we draw on it consciously, or implicit. We draw on implicit, tacit knowledge (Baumard 1999; Sternberg and Horvath 1999) without knowing, and we cannot articulate it. Learning new knowledge can occur either by addressing and challenging our explicit knowledge or by making explicit our tacit knowledge so as to explore the unstated assumptions that influence our work.

Implicit in these knowledge forms are the other two elements of practice that we propose. *Action* is the process of employing our procedural knowledge to influence our situation and, therefore, that of others. Much action is intuitive rather than considered, and difficult to explain, because it rests on tacit knowledge. We also need both a sense of the ideal toward which we aspire and, crucially, the ability to "read" and interpret a situation (Cave and Wilkinson 1992) in relation to that ideal, so that we can decide what it is "right" to do. Our *values*, which are both derived from our knowledge and a part of it, define the "ought" at any given moment.

A school-leadership team, for example, can be seen by the headteacher or principal as a consultative unit, shaping or informing the leader's decisions, or as an action unit, facing a range of tasks and drawing on the collective expertise of its members to address them (Wallace and Hall 1994). Their concept of what a team ought to be like will shape their reading of the situation they face with colleagues and so influence the skills and strategies they use to shape them into the kind of team they wish to create.

This discussion has been located in individual knowledge. However, some writers on knowledge management (Augier and Vendelo 1999; Nonaka 1994) have suggested that tacit knowledge can be a collective entity that must be made explicit before organizational learning can take place. Wenger (1998) indicated that such tacit knowledge creates communities of shared practice. If this is so, then professional development in leadership and management, which is concerned with influencing other colleagues' practice, must attend to both individual and collective tacit knowledge.

AFFECTING PRACTICE

Apart from the little-mentioned effect of reinforcing existing practice, our data suggest several distinct forms of CPD impact on practice. Minor changes to the way things were done could be put into prac-

tice almost immediately and could affect colleagues' work almost as quickly. We have called these "first order" impacts. Then there were more significant developments and improvements in existing practice. These "second order" impacts could be put into operation almost immediately, but they needed more time to become securely understood and to have a significant effect on their own and their colleagues' work. Lastly, there was some recognition of the possibility of more fundamental change to the assumptions defining good practice—a "third order" impact. Where that was indicated, subject leaders tended to see it as coming from the school's senior staff, particularly the headteacher. However, some headteachers and principals saw the subject leaders as potential agents of fundamental change. At Riverside, a girls' comprehensive school of about 700 students, for example, a target-setting CPD program was seen as a vehicle for breaking down traditions of professional autonomy and creating forms of accountability for individual teachers' classroom practice. At Fieldway School, a mixed school of about 1,500 students situated in a small country town, the deputy head sought to create a new philosophy of practice and saw the subject leaders as crucial partners in the enterprise, able to carry the initiative forward or block it.

Thus, we have three different orders of impact, each tending to occur along different time scales, and three constituent elements of practice, each of which can potentially be influenced by any of the three orders of impact. However, the way these three elements of practice relate to one another, and the ways in which impact on one can be expected to influence the others, is problematic.

Action—the things we do—might be the central feature of practice. Yet what we *actually* do is influenced by our sense of what we *ought* to do—our values as a sense of what is ideal—and this mediates the knowledge we bring to bear when we define what action is appropriate in a given setting.

Knowledge, especially tacit knowledge, and values might inform our practice quite independently of one another. Thus, we might identify certain actions as being appropriate in a particular situation even though our values lead us to question whether we should act in that way. When this happens, we have to resolve the tension between knowledge and values in some way (Duignan and Collins 2003).

Action might inform values pragmatically: what we find "works" in a particular situation becomes what we regard as "right" and appropriate, and thence contributes to the knowledge that informs our future actions. Prior knowledge of "what works," such as others' statements that "it worked for me," might produce a valuation of particular forms of action as the "right" thing to do, especially if their suggestions have "worked" before. This in turn creates a sense of how we *should* act in a given situation.

IMPACT ON WHAT, AND AT WHAT LEVEL?

Our construction of "practice" argues that it is an active rather than a static entity, in a constant state of tension between knowledge, action, and values as applied to a given setting. Thus, CPD might be a means of reinforcing existing policy, generating new initiatives, or supporting the implementation of new initiatives. We should not attempt to equate the relative merit or strength of impact with these different foci for CPD.

Two of our case studies exemplify this well. At Riverside, we observed a tension between a desire for CPD in support of implementing a new policy and CPD to support existing practice. The school has

developed a pupil-tracking database to analyze pupil development and evaluate teacher performance. Thus, it can help define individual teachers' professional-development needs. Such a program requires whole-school CPD to work effectively, but most of the school's CPD budget was committed to an induction program for new staff members, which deflected management priorities and undermined team building, sharing of resources, and critical staff dialogue. As one subject leader noted, "When someone doesn't know the routines, how can they be expected to comment on what they don't understand?" CPD in this case may be seen as a device for training staff members in the operation of a predefined system rather than promoting new elements of practice.

What we find "works" in a particular situation becomes what we regard as "right" and appropriate.

At Fieldway School, a concept of CPD as "teacher development" in its widest sense formed the vehicle through which a deputy head (vice-principal) sought to create a major cultural change in the school, changing how subject leaders viewed their role from who was responsible to them to those for whom they were responsible. He attempted to achieve this change by using routine occasions such as his regular meetings with subject leaders to model the kinds of behavior he sought to promote, and to focus discussions on long-term, less instrumental topics. Some subject leaders pursued this role enthusiastically, emphasizing in interviews how they had become less judgmental and more supportive of their staff members, but others resisted the move, often using their students' continuing high academic performance as a justification not to change the way they worked. Consequently, the school split into two competing leadership and management cultures, one heroic and the other facilitative. Ironically, the deputy head appeared to be taking a heroic approach to promoting facilitative leadership styles.

CONCLUSION

The two schools cited here show how the linkage between professional development and school policies and philosophy can differ. At Riverside, a policy introducing performance management needed CPD support that explained what is involved in performance management and how information on teacher performance can be derived from pupil-performance data. Thus, a policy change can be supported by forms of CPD activity in which propositional and procedural knowledge is taught and then reinforced by its systematic application so that it is first shared, and then ultimately becomes private and, eventually, tacit knowledge. In this case, second-order impact is sought on knowledge that can inform action. CPD is not seen as challenging the "rightness" of the performance-management scheme. This approach is an example of what is becoming the dominant means to CPD provision in England.

At Fieldway School, a major change in culture and philosophy is being sought, which the deputy head acknowledged derived from his own master's studies. These had called into question many orthodoxies of management development, particularly the claims for generic management competences and universally applicable skills. His studies have challenged the validity of the TTA standards incorporated

into the English National Headteacher Training Programme, and so by implication the subject leader standards associated with them. By seeking to create a major cultural change, this deputy head hopes to bring about third-order impact on teachers' values, with consequences for what is seen as legitimate and relevant knowledge and for the action deriving from it.

It could be argued that the Fieldway example, which resembles an attempt to create a learning community among the school's subject leaders, should not be seen as CPD. We suggest there are two ways in which it is. First, in the absence of adequate resources to make use of course-based CPD provision or an external consultant, such activity might be the only form of systematic, developmental CPD, as opposed to deficit-remedying CPD, that teachers in the school receive. The deputy head could be seen as an "internal consultant" (Bennett 1995) trying to create a new culture within the school. Second, because the deputy head was responding to his personal learning on his master's course, he could be seen as attempting to bring about an active form of the "cascade" CPD more usually associated with short-term updating or information-giving activities.

Our two examples show how the relationship between knowledge, action, and values can legitimately be conceptualized in different ways. They also demonstrate the significance of context as a mediating variable between professional-development opportunities and professional practice as leaders and managers. At present, our proposition of three kinds of impact, mediated by time, and three dimensions of practice may have some utility for CPD generally, but how they interrelate may be significant. In some cases, it is possible to see the primary focus for analyzing impact on practice lying in the interaction of knowledge and action, with propositional knowledge influencing the perception of the situation, procedural knowledge shaping the sense of how to handle it, and both potentially influencing action, though there is still room for resistance. This analysis holds for Riverside, and might exemplify the current orthodoxy in English CPD. Alternatively, the focus may be on propositional knowledge informing values by creating a sense of ideal practice, which creates strong opportunities for resistance to change. This could apply at Fieldway, where the main thrust of the deputy head's professional-development strategy was directed at the values of each individual subject leader. Fieldway was the only school where this approach was found, and it may not be common among English secondary schools. Nevertheless, if we are to generate a robust approach to assessing the impact of CPD on practice, the way in which the different elements influence one another would seem to be a key issue to address.

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