

AN EVALUATION OF A SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE: A CASE-STUDY OF A PRIMARY SCHOOL IN ENGLAND

Gurcharan Singh Bishen Singh, EdD.
Institut Aminuddin Baki

ABSTRACT

This study aims to evaluate a school improvement initiative and its relationship with leadership and other characteristics which are attributed to successful school effectiveness and improvement. The methodology adopted in this study is qualitative, using evaluation strategy. The method used is focus-groups involving a group of four teachers and a group of six pupils. Findings from the study seem to suggest that leadership provided by the senior leadership team is important and all teachers agreed that this change initiative came from the leaders. However, findings from this study also suggest that the teachers and pupils do not attribute leadership from the senior leaders as the sole factor that affects the programme. The teachers indicated a suitable time span for initiating new changes as an important factor and monitoring is deemed as another important factor. The pupils suggested that a wider usage of the programme should be in place and it should not be confined to certain subjects only.

INTRODUCTION

International research findings from across the world have suggested that schools do make a difference in helping to promote educational and social mobility of the learners (MacBeath et al., 2001; Scheerens, 1997; Mortimore et al., 1988; Brookover et al., 1979; Rutter et al., 1979). It is imperative then for schools to keep improving and the findings from the school improvement research field over the past three decades have become a powerful influence in both educational policy and practice (Harris, 2002).

School improvement involves change but Fullan (1991) reminds us that “not all change leads to school improvement” (p. 3). Thus, it is vital to have school improvement initiatives and evaluate them as well as to find out whether the initiatives have brought about or could potentially bring about improvement to the school or not.

Nevertheless, there are problems highlighted about the successful implementation and sustaining of the improvement programmes. Fullan (*ibid*) has called for those engaged in managing the change process to understand the requirements needed to see through the different phases of the change process. The role of leadership in a change initiative is seen as crucial by the researchers on school effectiveness and improvement (Stoll et al., 2001; Leithwood et al., 1999; Harris, 2002).

This study aims to evaluate a school improvement programme and its relationship with leadership and other characteristics which are attributed to successful school effectiveness and improvement initiatives. It will investigate the implementation phase of the Six Thinking Hats programme in teaching and learning in a case-study primary school. The Six Thinking Hats programme is adapted from Edward de Bono's 'six thinking hats' whereby the learner has to think about the lesson or topic being learned in terms of different aspects. For instance, white hat denotes facts on the topic, red hat denotes feelings about the topic or in the topic and black hat represents disadvantages or negative aspects and so forth.

The findings of this study will help the case-study school gauge the progress of the programme and lead the path to further necessary steps towards ensuring the success of the programme. It is also hoped to contribute to the existing literature on school effectiveness and improvement, especially pertaining to the implementation phase of a change process.

This study will address the following main research questions:

1. To what extent is the leadership provided by the senior leadership team of the school perceived by teachers to be crucial in the implementation of the Six Thinking Hats programme?
2. What are the other important characteristics perceived by teachers and pupils in the case-study school about the implementation of this improvement programme?

This paper will be presented in five sections. The introduction will present the overview of the research followed by section 2 on review of relevant literature on school effectiveness and improvement, and its relation with leadership and other characteristics. Section 3 will be the research design of the research and it will explain the strategy, methodology and method used. Findings and analysis will be discussed in Section 4 and conclusion in Section 5.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, selected literature on school improvement, change and leadership by leading international authors will be presented. Literature depicting other important factors in schools towards change process and school improvement will also be reviewed and the literature reviewed will inform this study.

2.2 School Improvement and change

Hopkins (1994) defines school improvement as “a strategy for educational change that enhances student outcomes as well as strengthening the school’s capacity for handling change” (p. 17)

Whilst a school improvement initiative inevitably involves some form of change (Harris, 2002), Fullan (1991) reminds us that “not all change leads to school improvement” (p. 3). Some changes can be counter-productive if not supported by a climate for change which gels with the climate for improvement. Schools need to understand the nature and process of change, as well as understanding why barriers to change might occur (Harris, 2002).

Fullan (1991) identified three phases of the change process:

- the initiation phase
- the implementation phase
- the institutionalisation or continuation phase

The implementation phase, which is the focus of this study, is said to be a crucial time and Fullan (2001) noted that one of his most consistent findings and understandings of the change process is that all schools experience the “implementation dip”. While it is said to be inevitable in any change process, Fullan (2001) nevertheless associates it with two kinds of problem - a fear of change and

being out of control on one hand and the feeling of inadequate skills and abilities to implement change on the other. Meanwhile, the success at this phase is attributed to clarity of purpose, shared control, an appropriate mix of pressure and support from the leadership and sustained enthusiasm.

Fullan (2001) cautioned schools with too many change initiatives - change overload - as “Christmas tree schools” that are “superficially adorned with many decorations, lacking depth and coherence” (p. 35). It is imperative, therefore, to set aside time for the school to embed the change and to evaluate it before moving on to the next initiative.

2.3 Leadership and School Improvement

School improvement research in UK and many other countries has consistently emphasised the importance of leadership and management (Stoll, MacBeath and Mortimore, 2001). The Improving School Effectiveness (ISE) Project, undertaken by MacBeath, Mortimore and others in Scotland between 1995 and 1997 found leadership as an important theme in their study that it merited inclusion as a main theme (*ibid*). Their study involved 80 schools – with a total of 7000 pupils, 2500 teachers and 5400 parents. The study which mixed quantitative with qualitative methodologies was the first large-scale attempt to integrate the approaches of school effectiveness and school improvement in Scotland, and its themes were international (MacBeath et al., 2001).

The ISE Project looked at the influences of leadership to change, which they called change leadership, to content leadership and process leadership. The content leadership concept is a reference to the expertise and interest of the change leaders which they claim were associated with positive effects on pupil attainment. This included the leader(s) attending relevant courses on the initiative, expressing a personal interest in the content and demonstrating a degree of expertise on the content of the change. The process leadership concept entails the change leader(s) to consult staff and involve staff to secure ownership and commitment from them, and to place the change initiative within a broader strategy for school improvement.

The notion of school improvement has been associated with transformational leadership (Duignan and Macpherson, 1992; Leithwood et al., 1999; Harris, 2002). Leithwood and others (1999) claim that there is evidence to demonstrate a positive relationship between transformational leadership approaches and school improvement. They emphasize that the evidence has been shown to involve the building of school cultures or promoting culture behaviours that contribute directly to school improvement (Leithwood et al., 1999). Harris (2002) illustrates that some of the behaviours by transformational leaders to strengthen school culture include reinforcing the norms of excellence by staff and students, providing the opportunities for collaboration between staff, and sharing power with others – being people-oriented rather than organisation-oriented.

Hopkins and others (1994) related school improvement to educational change and emphasized the two main purposes for the endeavour as “enhancing student achievement” and “strengthening the school’s capacity for change” (p. 68). The latter involves, amongst others, building the capacity of individual teachers (Sergiovanni, 2000) and enabling them to do things by trusting them (Day et al., 2000). Moreover, the leader demonstrates confidence in his or her own ability and delegate tasks and allows people to do things without trying to control it all (*ibid*).

2.4 Teacher Leadership

School improvement researchers have consistently stressed the importance of teachers’ commitment to change, and a form of professional development that enhances their capacity to deal with it (Stoll et al., 2001).

Teacher leadership is regarded as another factor in improving schools; whereby the leadership role permeates throughout the school and does not rest only with the head. The core of teacher leadership is shared understanding and shared purpose and it engages all within the organisation in reciprocal learning process that leads to collective action and meaningful change (Harris, 2002). Research by Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) on the effects of transformational leadership on selected organisational conditions and student engagement with school; using surveys on 1,762 teachers and 9,941 students in a large school district in a province in eastern Canada revealed, amongst others, that teacher leadership demonstrates a significant effect on student engagement compared to principal leadership. This indicated the importance of developing teacher leadership within the school to better facilitate a change process.

2.5 Pupil Voice

Pickering (1997) argues that pupils’ voice and involvement in school is essential to school improvement because the initiatives affect these pupils as learners. Many studies found pupils to be articulate observers of the school environment (MacBeath and Weir, 1991; SooHoo, 1993; Rudduck et al., 1996). All these emphasize on pupil’s voice prompted MacBeath and others (2001) to assert that “we must take scrupulous and systematic account of pupil views in order to broaden the scope of how we evaluate effectiveness and inform school improvement”. In this study, pupil voice is sought to provide information on their involvement by the school in this change initiative and the effectiveness of the “Six Thinking Hats Programme” on their learning. It will help the study to evaluate the process as well as the outcome of the programme.

2.6 Implications for the study

The literature reviewed seems to suggest that leadership is an important factor in achieving a successful improvement programme or change process. There are tenets of leadership which appear to be important, as follows;

- ability of the leader to communicate with the staff clearly about the purpose of the initiative which involves learning and focus on pupils,
- ability to understand the content of the change initiative;
- consulting staff and involving them to secure ownership and commitment towards the change;
- developing the personnel and promoting the culture of change by enabling them to do work and trusting them, without controlling everything;
- demonstrating confidence in the initiative and the enthusiasm to see it through.

Other than school leaders, the literature also pointed to other important factors –teacher leadership and respect for pupils’ voice.

The reviewed literature will be used as a guideline in this study to evaluate the “Six Thinking Hats Programme” in the case-study school, with a specific focus on the implementation phase of this change initiative.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The methodology adopted in this study is qualitative, using interpretive approach and evaluation strategy. In this study, the ‘truth’ is assumed to reside in the researched and it is the aim of the researcher to try to understand that particular social ‘reality’ through the accounts of the former. In this study, it will be the perceptions and views of the samples which will constitute this reality, interpreted by the researcher. The evaluation form or category in this enquiry is impact evaluation, using the process-outcomes approach (Owen, 1999).

The method used in this study is focus-groups. This method is chosen because it provides a means to collect information individually as well as collectively. This method is preferred over the quantitative enquiry using questionnaire in this study because this method will provide in-depth information on the topic and the participants will be able to express themselves more freely compared to the more structured responses in the questionnaire method. Furthermore, interactions amongst the participants will provide some form of check and balance in order to avoid false or extreme views.

Two focus groups were interviewed in this study – one comprising of four teachers of the school and another with six pupils in the school. The pupils were chosen two each from year 4, year 5 and year 6 classes (Key stage 2). These teachers and pupils were chosen randomly. The teachers were chosen by drawing up their names from a box containing names of all the school teachers while the same

procedure was administered for the pupils. The two groups were chosen as to add validity to the data generated by means of respondent triangulation. The interviews were transcribed and data from the transcripts were analysed manually by decoding the responses into themes. This was done manually, similar to assertion by Field (2000) in his study, on grounds of convenience. These themes were categorised into leadership factor and other factors. Teachers' identities are anonymised by referring to teacher participants as Teacher 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D'. Similarly pupils' identities are also anonymised as Pupil 'A', 'B', 'C', 'D', 'E' and 'F'.

Permission was sought from the headteacher, the 'gatekeeper' of the school, before the focus groups were done. Teachers and pupils who made up the sample were asked their permission for the discussion to be audio taped. Class teachers were informed and consent was sought from the pupils before they were interviewed.

Ethical considerations were given the highest importance in that informed consent was sought from all the samples and their 'gatekeeper', in this case the headteacher of the school. All care was taken to inform the samples that audio-recording will be used but their identities will be safeguarded and the reporting will be done in anonymity. The guideline from BERA (British Educational Research Association) Revised Ethical Guidelines for Researchers, which was revised in 2004 from its original form of 1992, was used as the compass to maintain ethic of respect for the person, knowledge, democratic values, the quality of educational research, and academic freedom in this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This section presents the findings of this study through the qualitative enquiry in the form of process-outcome evaluation using focus groups method. The findings will be discussed to answer the two research questions of the study.

4.2 Research Question 1 - To what extent is leadership provided by the senior leadership team of the school perceived by teachers to be crucial in the implementation of the "Six Thinking Hats Programme"?

Findings from the focus groups seem to suggest that leadership provided by the senior leadership team, i.e. the headteacher and deputy headteacher is important and all the teachers agreed that this change initiative came from the leaders and the leaders are very actively involved in it.

The teachers unanimously asserted that they have been well informed of the purpose of the initiative and this concurs with the suggestion from Fullan (1991) with regards to the implementation phase of a change process. It also concurs with Hopkins and others (1994) who iterated that the change should be to enhance student achievement; a fact agreed by all the teachers and the pupils alike. However,

there seems to be apprehension from the teachers as to how fully they are able to utilize the programme. Asked about their general thinking about the programme, Teachers C and D responded as follows:

“I have not been utilising the techniques formally in my lesson plans although I might use it from time to time.” (Teacher C)

“I think it is a good programme but I have not been able to do it all the time either.” (Teacher D)

These responses seem to suggest that the programme is a good one but there seems to be an indication that there might be some feelings of inadequacy amongst teachers, as suggested by Fullan (1991) when he discusses the problems of the implementation phase. This indication came quite clearly from one of the teachers who confess the following:

“The guidelines are there but for me, I am still not too good at implementing it.” (Teacher D)

Fullan (1991) also suggested that the other problem in implementation phase is the fear for change and being out of control. Majority of the teachers in the focus group indicated that they are faced with many initiatives and this posed as a challenge for them to implement this programme adequately. The finding seem to agree with Fullan (*ibid*) that there is a feeling of being out of control and it is actually caused by the perception of too many initiatives taken on board every so often in the school.

The findings, on the other hand, also suggest that the teachers seem not to have fear of change and they are used to feeling the climate for change in their school. It was very aptly put by one teacher:

“Change is always around us”. (Teacher A)

Nevertheless, there seems to be fear of coping with so many changes happening at the same time in the school, as expressed by Teacher D as follows:

“And sometimes it is not too easy to cope with it (the intense change)”.

Responses from the teachers in the interview point to the ability of the leaders to understand the content and the process of the change initiative. The findings, however, seem to indicate that due to the many initiatives in this school, the leaders’ attention on this particular programme is perceived to have decreased. The following responses from some of the teachers seem to suggest this notion:

“They (the leaders) are always enthused about the programme ...it gets a little less because other programmes come into implementation.” (Teacher B)

“But we have had more concentration on the programme in its early implementation but it seems to be less now.” (Teacher C)

“Yes, (agreeing to the above statement by Teacher C) because there are other programmes now to discuss and there will be more as we move along. (Teacher A)

The findings also suggest that there has been effort by the school leadership to develop the personnel for the change initiative, concurring with the literature (Hopkins et al., 1994; Sergiovanni, 2000) on attributes of effective leadership for change. When linked to the promotion of change culture by the leaders, the findings seem to indicate that the culture of change is indeed prevalent in the school but it could not be attributed solely to this programme. Due to the many improvement programmes

happening in the school at the same time, all the teachers indicated some level of stress coping up with all of these. One particular response represented this quite clearly.

“It is difficult to single out this particular programme because we have a few programmes running at the same time. We can definitely feel the climate of change taking place in our school because changes happen ever so fast – one initiative after another.” (Teacher A)

The responses from the interview seem to suggest that the teachers perceive themselves as not having much say in the initiative but they adhered to the directives of the school leaders. It was not clear though whether there is resentment with that because they seem to have come to terms with the fact that in this small school many changes happen and everyone is inevitably involved.

Therefore, with regards to this change initiative, it is not conclusive that the leaders were demonstrating behaviours of transformational leadership as put forth by Harris (2002) as one determinant of an effective change.

4.3 Research Question 2 - What are the other important characteristics perceived by teachers and pupils in the case-study school about the implementation of the Six Thinking Hats programme?

Findings from this study seem to suggest that the teachers and pupils do not attribute leadership from the senior leaders as the sole factor that affects the implementation of the “Six Thinking Hats Programme” in the school. The teachers unanimously agree that the programme is a good programme and that professional development has taken place for them to deal with this change initiative. The findings seem to agree with Stoll and others (2001) that teachers’ commitment to the change is important. However, it is not too clear whether leadership permeates from the senior leaders to the teachers as all but one do not perceive themselves as leaders.

The teachers seem to be suggesting that there should be not too many initiatives introduced at the same time, or one after another with very little time in between them. This indicates a suitable time span for initiating new changes as an important factor, as indicated in the following typical response: It also seems to indicate that the “Six Thinking Hats Programme” should be concentrated fully on before other improvement programmes are taken on board. The teachers also seem to attribute monitoring as an important character in this change process. All the above is derived from the following responses:

“It (the programme) needs revisiting from time to time.” (Teacher A)

“Yes, and we do not talk about it so much anymore during our Wednesday staff development meetings.

There should be more follow-ups.” (Teacher B)

“And there shouldn’t be too many initiatives which can easily override the previous ones, including this programme.” (Teacher C)

Other important characteristics perceived by the teachers are; having an evaluation of the programme, and having personnel specially in-charge of this programme apart from the senior leaders.

Most of the pupils interviewed suggested that there should be more usage of the programme by the teachers and not confined to certain subjects only. The pupils also seem to indicate that not many parents are fully aware about this beneficial programme. The following responses were made by pupils on the question of whether their parents were made aware of the programme:

“Not so.” (Pupil B)

“Not so much.” (Pupil A)

“Yes, only a couple of parents came to the evening (of training for the parents).” (Pupil F)

“And if parents knew more about it, and if they are teachers like my parents, especially for different types of school, like the school for disable people, it would be good to use them with the teachers there.” (Pupil D)

The articulate responses from the pupils concur with the suggestion by the literature (MacBeath et al., 2001; SooHoo, 1993; Rudduck et al., 1996) that pupils’ voice is indeed an important determinant in evaluating an improvement programme.

As this programme is a new initiative and still in implementation phase, much of the process could be evaluated but not much could be evaluated from the impact or outcome viewpoint. Most of the teachers seem to agree that the programme is good but said that monitoring of the programme is needed to ascertain its impact thus far. The pupils, on the other hand, unanimously agreed that they are learning better with this programme but suggested that the usage could be expanded and not confined to certain subjects.

CONCLUSION

This study of an improvement programme in a case-study school was done to evaluate the change process and the impact of the change. The findings show that leadership is perceived as crucial in the implementation of this change process but there are other important factors as well. The “Six Thinking Hats Programme” in the case-study school seems to be a good programme which is beneficial for the learning of pupils but the implementation process seems not to be going as smooth as it should be. This is mainly due to the many initiatives undertaken by the school which seems to make it difficult for the teachers to cope fully with any particular one. Monitoring seems to be the perceived missing link and it seems to be so because of the small size of the school staff. The teachers seem to be hard working and committed but they seem overwhelmed with the many change initiatives going on ever so rapidly around them.

Much of the literature seems to suggest about ways of making changes work effectively in schools but I think that itself does not make the story complete. As much as changes are imperative in improving schools, should there be as many changes as possible to enable one to be an effectively improving school? Is it the enthusiasm of the school leaders to get ahead of the pack or is it pressure from the powers that be? How would it be possible for all schools, especially the smaller ones, to initiate so many change programmes that involve the same personnel over and over again and expect to succeed

in each of them? It will be akin to the old adage of having the cake and eating it all up too! One way forward to check this is by having research on all these aspects and to further investigate why schools that have so many initiatives actually have them – is it due to leadership, policies, political pressures or other factors? As much as this case-study school seems to fit into Fullan's (1991) depiction of 'Christmas tree school' that just seems to have too many changes, it seemingly would not be conclusive without first finding out why it has positioned itself in such a situation? The conclusion, if persisted upon, will be at its best only showing one side of the coin while the other side remains assumed. That itself poses as the limitation of this study apart from the use of only one school as a sample.

REFERENCES

- BERA (2004). *Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. Retrieved from <http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/guides>
- Brookover, W., Beady, C., Flood, P. & Schweitzer, J. (1979). *School social systems and student achievement: Schools can make a difference*. New York: Praeger.
- Day, C., Harris, A., Hadfield, M., Tolley, H. & Beresford, J. (2000). *Leading schools in times of change*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Duignan, P.A. and Macpherson, R.J.S. (1992). *Educative leadership: A practical theory for new administrators and managers*. London: Falmer Press.
- Field, J. (2000). Researching Lifelong Learning Through Focus Groups. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 24(3), 323-35.
- Fullan, M. (1991). *The new meaning of educational change*. London: Cassell.
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Harris, A. (2002). *School improvement: What's in it for schools?* London: Routledge Falmer.
- Hopkins, D. (1994). *Towards a theory for school improvement*. Paper presented to ESRC Seminar Series on School Effectiveness and School Improvement, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, October.
- Hopkins, D., Ainscow, M. & West, M. (1994). *School improvement in an era of change*. London: Cassell.
- Leithwood, K. and Jantzi, D. (2000). The effects of transformational leadership on organizational conditions and student engagement with school. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 38(2), 112-129.

- Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D. and Steinback, R. (1999). *Changing leadership for changing times*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- MacBeath, J. and Mortimore, P. (2001). School effectiveness and improvement: the story so far. In J. MacBeath and P. Mortimore (Eds.), *Improving School Effectiveness* Buckingham: Open University Press
- MacBeath, J. and Weir, D. (1991). *Attitudes to schools*, occasional paper. Glasgow: Jordanhill College.
- Mortimore, P., Sammons, P., Stoll, L., Lewis, D., & Ecob, R. (1988). *School Matters: The Junior Years*. Somerset: Open Books.
- Owen, J.M. (1999). *Program evaluation: Forms and approaches*. London: Sage.
- Pickering, J. (1997). *Involving pupils*. SIN (School Improvement Network) Research Matters No. 6 Spring London: University of London Institute of Education, 8 pp.
- Rudduck, J., Chaplain, R. & Wallace, G. (1996). *School improvement: What can pupils tell us?* London: Fulton.
- Rutter, M., Maugham, B., Mortimore, P., Ouston, P., & Smith, A. (1979). *Fifteen thousand hours: Secondary schools and their effects on children*. London: Open Books.
- Scheerens, J. (1997). Theories on effective schooling. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 8(3): 220-42.
- Sergiovanni, T. (2000). *The lifeworld of leadership*. London: Jossey-Bass.
- SooHoo, S. (1993). Students as partners in research and restructuring schools. *The Educational Forum*, 57: 386-92.
- Stoll, L., MacBeath, J., & Mortimore, P. (2001). Beyond 2000: Where next for effectiveness and improvement. In J. MacBeath and P. Mortimore (Eds.), *Improving School Effectiveness*. Buckingham: Open University Press.