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Assessing the impact of PPD: Let the teachers speak

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Background

As we approach the end stages of the current TDA Postgraduate Professional Development (PPD) funding arrangements, and the introduction of the new MTL, and the associated vision to make teaching a Master's Level profession, it seems germane, and indeed timely to review concepts and measures of the impact of such provision.

In their 2003 report, Soulsby and Swain identified 5 central issues on which to structure their findings. The first of these, Impact, is reported on each year by providers of PPD, as part of their TDA evaluation report. A key finding of the OFSTED Report of 2004 was that while all providers did monitor impact, there were many missed opportunities. In particular, end of course evaluation often focuses on the evaluation of course content and delivery, rather than the impact on practice that the provision has made. *"Opportunities to monitor the impact of training are sometimes missed... about a third of these [the providers] fail to include any evaluation of the impact of the course on the participants' practice or on their school"* (Ofsted, 2004: 11)

Providers of PPD must provide, on an annual basis, an Impact Evaluation Report, addressing in the first section of the report, the following three questions:

1. Part 1: What kinds of impact have you discovered on participants, pupils, schools and others?
2. Part 2: How do you know this has been an impact of PPD? How did you approach this exercise?
3. Part 3: What are the implications of your findings for your current and future provision?

The first two of these questions directly address both the practicality of assessing impact and the explication of what that impact might be. Providers have the freedom to collect and collate the data to address these questions in any way they see fit.

Research Questions

During the earlier stages of PPD engagement, teachers may have the opportunity to engage in small scale practitioner enquiries, many of which are time-limited to 1 term or semester in line with module schedules (although longer time spans are sometimes available). The final dissertation however, typically takes place over a period of between 12 and 18 months, and provides opportunities for teachers to conduct a more systematic piece of research into practice, often their own, monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of changes introduced. This project seeks to pilot a larger scale evaluation project which draws on, analyses and synthesises ten dissertations produced in the past year by MA students working in a range of schools, under the guidance of a university in the North West of England.

This paper outlines a first phase project to draw more directly on data produced as a natural outcome of participation in a PPD programme, the MA dissertation, as means of collecting and collating teachers own articulations of their own professional learning and practice development during their engagement with PPD.

Methods

The proposed methodology is that of a cross-cases analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994), and using concepts such as that of Groundwater-Smith and Campbell (2010) which "joins the dots", and connects inquiry and professional learning. For the purposes of this first phase project, the work of teachers in the form of their MA dissertations, will be subject to cross-cases analysis. Ten teachers, all of whom have successfully submitted dissertations in the past year, and who come from a variety of schools and specialisms have been chosen for the study. The study is a theory-building one, in that no pre-determined analytic framework will be selected, deriving instead from the data set.

Given that the range of dissertations chosen is likely to produce a highly mixed and complex data set, frameworks, such as those of Cresswell and Plano Clark (2007) (ch7) will form the basis of the data analysis processes in order to ensure the production of a coherent and epistemological justified overall report. In particular, issues of threat to the validity of the reported outcomes will be addressed through the use and customisation of such processes.

Frame

Coombs, Lewis and Denning in their paper "Designing and evaluating impact evidence for the UK's TDA Professional Postgraduate Professional Development Programme" (2007) discuss the problematic issues involved in assessing impact, and indeed identify both substantive and methodological conflict in some such endeavours. In particular, they identify the tension between the TDA requirements for demonstrable evidence of impact on pupil achievement, and their espoused position that "information mechanisms should draw on existing resources wherever possible and...must not burden schools and Local Authorities with requests for data that is additional to that produced as a natural outcome of running or participating in the programme"

In 2001, Winter asked "how can the intellectual qualities of workplace practice be identified, evidenced and assessed?". The MA dissertation provides for teachers on PPD programmes an ideal opportunity to explore this very issue, and illustrate the essential theory-practice relationship evident in their educational practice, crossing "*the boundaries between theory and practice where it creates praxis, the synthesis of theory and practice*" (Campbell, A. and Groundwater-Smith, S. (2010: 12). In addition, it provides a timeframe in which issues relating to the practice based impact of their study may be monitored and evaluated.

A range of typologies for the evaluation of continuing professional development currently exists, with that of Harland and Kinder (1997) still being considered seminal. However, debates around the quantifiability of indicators of impact, and in particular on pupil achievement, continue to explore the difficulties in making claims for causal relationship. Powell and Terrell (2003) question the appropriateness of such a definition of impact claiming that teachers' own judgments are equally important. As such then, this study seeks to give voice to those judgments through the analysis of their articulation in MA dissertations.

Research findings

The intended outcome of this study is to produce, in the **first** instance, an analytic and a synthetic overview of teachers' own articulations of their professional learning during their MA study. **Secondly**, an overview of their own evaluations of the impact of that learning will be distilled from their dissertations. During this phase of the study, claims for impact will be triangulated against the nature and strength of the evidence produced. **Thirdly**, the study seeks to produce a systematic overview report, and classificatory typology of the identified impact of engaging with PPD, based on teacher's own work, in a way that more closely evidences and gives voice to this large, already existing body of work, than currently happens through TDA evaluation processes.