

SCEL Fellowship Programme

Area of Enquiry

Maturing the system: A model for school to school, peer to peer evaluation

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“Maturing the System”: A model for school to school, peer to peer evaluation

In this enquiry I have reflected on the ongoing debate concerning school governance and the emergence of a more focused approach to self- evaluation. My intention is to develop a model for self- sustaining evaluative communities across the system. The question that frames this enquiry is “What professional learning is required to establish an ethos of peer led critical evaluation across schools to strengthen self- evaluation?”

Introduction

The aim of this enquiry is the creation of a model of peer evaluation across schools to develop a robust system of critical evaluation which facilitates transformation in schools by modifying structures and /or thinking and practice in real time. This will be designed to support a shift from relying on external agents for evaluation, for example local authorities or Education Scotland, to that of a locally sourced perspective that has considered available research and critically reflected on the practice witnessed before presenting their findings to the host school. This model has been named Peer Led Critical Self Evaluation (PLCSE).

Context and rationale for the enquiry

It appears we are entering a period of significant change and discussion about the shape of Scottish education. The creation of the *Delivery Plan* indicates a move towards new models of leadership, operation and ultimately new thinking about professional purpose. The plan indicates that a shift is needed for us to move from a “culture of judgment to a system of judgment” which will have at its core empowered teachers, schools and communities (Scottish Government 2016 p3). The *Delivery Plan* goes further by proposing an introduction of educational regions linked to a desire to devolve decision making to individual schools. This places the responsibilities for raising attainment firmly in the remit of schools rather than local authorities and raises new opportunities for the ways in which schools evaluate their practice (Scottish Government 2016 p11).

The potential changes centre around governance and the subsequent accountability of individual schools for raising attainment. Additionally, there is the emerging of a possible new relationship between local authorities and schools. In this period of flux,

uncertainty, excitement and challenge, school leaders may be required to envision a world of increased autonomy, accountability and a possible shrinkage of the centre. Schools may need to be more creative and adopt bespoke solutions to ensure that there is continual transformation within the system, as the closure of the poverty attainment gap remains a key indicator of success (Scottish Government 2016). With a possible reduction in local authorities' capacity for quality assurance activities, there may be a need to look for alternative ways to gain an external perspective on the progress of local practices as systems and processes are developed. I propose that there is a need for a "maturing" of the system with less dependency on formal inspections by Education Scotland or local authorities for quality review. With schools and other stakeholders adopting joint responsibility for the quality of learning experiences and outcomes for young people.

In developing a model, I have drawn on a number of strands of research which has helped to clarify my own thinking and formulate the different elements (Figure 1 – see p5).

There appears to have been a danger for schools to be too congratulatory about the quality of their own work in what Brookfield (1998) calls a self- confirming cycle. The recent challenge questions in HGIOS4 Education Scotland (2015) have started to shape and challenge practice through an outward focus. I suggest that this would be complemented by the addition of an external local perspective which would create more opportunities for collaborative critical reflection. According to Elmore (2000) "learning is a collaborative activity and educators learn more powerfully in concert with others" this sentiment has become a touchstone for the shaping of this model.

I have entitled this enquiry "maturing the system" and have borrowed my understanding from both Lord (1994) and Barret (1997) who introduce the concept of a critical being who not only develops critical thinking but promotes critical development and the commitment to take action. This is usefully encapsulated as "critical collegueship" by Lord (1994), a concept which promotes criticality and evolution of practice. If schools are to make the transformational changes required to begin to close the poverty related attainment gap then the profession may have to develop a more critical stance on weak practice, be more open to critique themselves and consider this as central to becoming and being a professional.

Kirtman (2014) suggests that one of the competencies of high performing leaders is building external networks and partnerships. This combined with Hargreaves & Fullan's (2014) assertion that engaging learning outside your school will increase

learning within your school and help to build “human, social and decisional capital.” Fullan also suggests that the fulfilment of large scale reforms will only occur when members of the system act from a shared mind-set stemming from such collaborative working. Sahlberg (2006) further develops this concept of “lateral capacity building” which has been a foundational guiding principle in Finland in developing local innovation and the sharing of educational change knowledge. In addition Dimmock (2016) suggests networking, collaboration and community leadership as one of the competencies of a system leader. Drawing on these views and wider professional reading I identified a number of principles of a “mature system.”

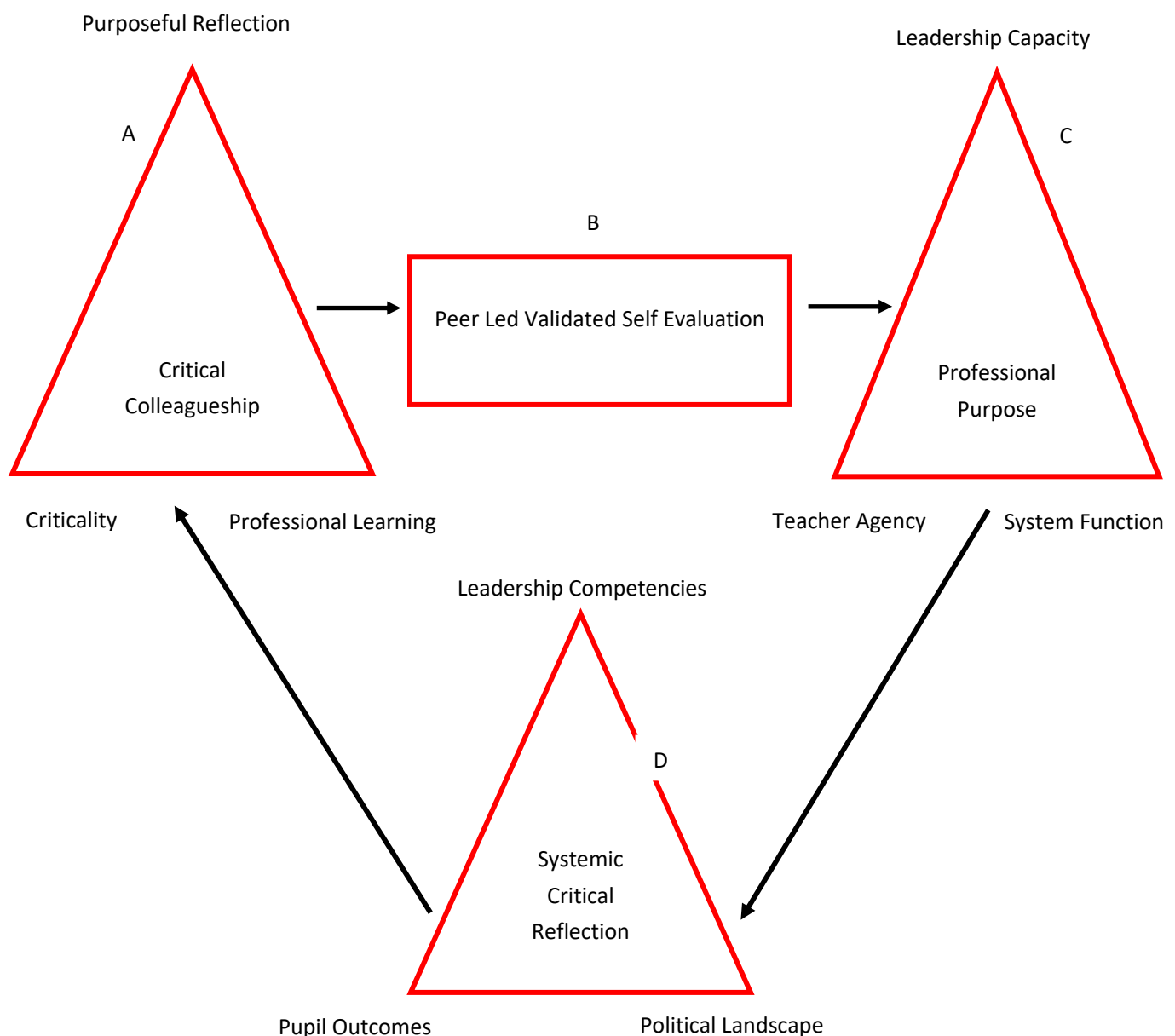
- The sharing of best practice is intentional and purposeful rather than optional with a direct impact on student outcomes
- The development of enhanced critical thinking skills which both increase leadership capacity and add to the system (system function)
- Development of widespread school to school self-evaluation partnerships based on collaborative reflective criticality
- Development of more robust conversations within and between schools about quality and impact in a non-threatening, collegiate manner in real time
- Establishment of a framework to enable schools to “look out” (Education Scotland 2015) in a more strategic way rather than a possibly limiting “school visit”
- Widespread ownership of the evolution and development of the system with an expectation that it is ours “to fix”. With an expectation that we have a professional responsibility for the system

I propose that developing a model which incorporates these principles would encourage less reliance on the local authority for direction and feedback as well as promoting locally based expertise to promote school based self-evaluation. This appears to resonate with the OECD (2015 p11) report in two main ways: firstly, the recommendation of the development of strategies for building leadership social capital with a “greater sense of self efficacy rather than working in isolation”, and secondly, the development of evaluation at system level with a “clear line of sight from learners experiences” alongside “collective responsibility and mutual accountability”.

Conceptual framework

Drawing upon my research and enquiry as well as professional dialogue with other system leaders I have constructed a conceptual framework that places Peer Led Critical Self Evaluation (PLCSE) within a wider systems transformation that is an interplay between critical collegueship, professional purpose and systemic critical reflection. These three concepts both inform and shape the PLCSE process.

Maturing the System (Fig. 1)



The development of criticality, professional learning and purposeful reflection within and across schools creates the conditions that promote critical collegueship (A). This is applied using PLCSE (B) through inter-school collegiate working. The professional learning through this process will hone professional purpose which will manifest itself in increased teacher agency and increased leadership capacity, and subsequently build capacity across the system (C). In time the cross school approach replicated throughout the system promote, revision, renewal and systematic critical reflection (D). As this process becomes established it is intended improve pupil outcomes and enhanced leadership competencies .

Critical Collegueship

To facilitate the transformative learning required within schools, which positively impacts on pupil outcomes, the model would require the adoption of a critical stance towards practice. This would demand more than the ubiquitous “sharing of good practice” that has been promoted to the profession for many years. Indeed I propose that we need to move away from the sharing of good practice to the implementation of good practice. The conundrum is to enable teachers know to recognise good practice and develop as critical thinkers who can evaluate their own and others’ practice. Critical collegueship requires an honest confrontation of practice about what is seen both personally and in the practice of other colleagues. Lord (1994) suggests teachers need to develop a mind set to “confront unproductive practices with an eye to full scale revision.” I have drawn upon elements of critical collegueship in the model (fig1), primarily the use of reflection as an agent of disequilibrium that provokes a disruption of thinking and on-going critique. The model is based on an expectation that participants are: open to different perspectives; adopt a permissive ethos that rejects poor practice based on evidence; acquire data that helps craft and support an evaluative response; are empathetic in their understanding. Fullan and Stiegelbaur (1991) suggest that if educational change is to occur then there will be a requirement for teachers to understand themselves better and be better understood by others. The model proposed goes some way to nurture this self-knowledge, as well as knowledge of others. A key component of the proposed model is purposeful reflection, as opposed to reflection that is not aligned to a benchmark or evaluative statement. According to Fade (2005) “reflection involves describing, analysing and evaluating of thoughts, assumptions, beliefs, theories and actions”. Reflection is a notion that is explicit in the GTCS standards, but I suggest that there is often a limited understanding of what constitutes reflection within the profession. It may be time to adopt a more

systematic approach to promote a transformative learning experience. Schon (1987) identified two types of reflection: reflection in action which in essence is “on the spot reflection” and reflection on action which adopts a much more retrospective stand. The latter is the type of reflection I want to inform the model, by adopting a more systematic and intentional approach based on Atkins and Murphy (1995) five stages of the reflection process:

- Description- What happened?
- Feelings- What is your reaction?
- Evaluation- What was useful/not useful for your learning? How does it compare with your own practice?
- Analysis- What sense can you make of the process? What ideas experiences can you add?
- Conclusion- What needs to happen next to deepen your learning? What do you need to discuss, read or question further?

These stages provide a structure for the reflective process within the model.

The professional learning aspect of the framework is predicated on the work of Mezirow (1990) who states that for transformative learning to take place adult learners are required to critically reflect on their assumptions. Furthermore Vella (2002) suggests that adults need to be “both decision makers and the subjects and agents of their own learning”. Larivee (2008) notes that unless the profession takes a critically reflective stance there would be a professional entrapment in a place of “unexamined judgments, interpretations, assumptions and expectations”. Thus, it is intended that the proposed model shifts the teacher into a sphere of criticality as they work collegiately in other settings.

Peer Led Critical Self Evaluation

The model, if effective, will enable teachers to professionally “look out” from their school, improve their own skills in evaluation and build capacity in the system for critical evaluation. The final two concepts in the conceptual model Professional Purpose and Systemic Critical Reflection, are less well developed at this stage of the enquiry.

Professional Purpose

If the PLCSE process is effective in developing critical collegueship, then it is expected that there will be a sharpening of professional purpose as documented in the GTCS Standard framework. This could be bolstered by the development of teacher agency which Pyhältö, Pietarinen & Soini (2014 p 307) suggest as a responsibility not only for their own thinking and problem solving, but also for the development of the professional community.” This places teacher agency firmly at the centre of teacher professionalism and which should be promoted by the efficacy of PLCSE. Emirbayer & Mische (1998) cite this type of activity as a dialogical process where there is a collaborative engagement within the particular context of action. This sits well within the PLCSE framework with the intention of maturing the system. The model starts to challenge the notion that professional learning is centred around the operational rather than a more intellectual engagement with theory. It is easy to concur with Calvert (2016 p2) who castigates much of what is deemed professional development as “an empty exercise in compliance” which is in stark contrast to the concept of agency where teachers act “purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of their colleagues”. This is the essence of what could be delivered by the model. The proposed model appears to embed the conditions that support teacher agency, Calvert (2016), including what Priestley, Biesta & Robinson (2015) call an “ecological approach to teacher agency”. This ecological approach comprises three parts: colleagues who are rooted in past experience with a wide repertoire to draw on; colleagues orientated to the future that envisions future possibilities and a sense of action in the presence.

Systemic Critical Reflection

As professional purpose becomes more finely tuned it may be reasonable to assume system led impact of this model. The connection between leadership capacity, behaviour and actions to improved pupil outcomes is well documented and Leithwood & Day (2004) with leadership being considered second only to classroom teaching amongst the factors that impact on student outcomes. This is achieved through three leadership practices: the setting of direction; ensuring a supportive culture and developing people by the provision of support and professional learning. Therefore it is reasonable to propose that as the system matures in the way I have indicated that student outcomes will improve due to the increased understanding of professional purpose. The framework has the potential to build professional resilience for the

future in relation to increased expectations with a more rapid response to evaluating local initiatives. This would ensure continued resilience to the changing political landscape which requires education to focus on multiple initiatives e.g. the pupil equity fund, school governance review.

Implementation of Peer Led Critical Self Evaluation

To test the effectiveness of this proposal it was piloted across two Aberdeenshire secondary schools. These schools recruited a team of participants in each school to undertake appropriate, tailored professional learning based on participant need and appropriate professional reading.

Developing criticality was an area that required significant work with the pilot group through a combination of active learning and discussion. One key activity was the dissection of a HGIOS4 quality indicator (QI) in small groups where participants were asked to backward map what would be visible in a school performing at level 5 (Scottish Government 2015). Participants were then asked to construct a series of critical questions they would ask to help make evaluative judgements on that QI. To aid questioning a critical question matrix was used by participants to unpack the language within the QI and discuss the nuances and the correlation between what would be seen at level 5. Participants used this matrix to formulate possible questions that they would ask. I felt it was important that there was a contextual aspect for this work to emphasise the need and purpose at this particular time. This involved discussions around the review of governance, the possible shrinkage of the “middle” and the notion of ownership of the system. I asserted that in my opinion the mature position is one where we are able to change the system by exercising “externality” and the use of different lenses e.g. engagement with theoretical literature (Brookfield 1998) to determine the quality of practice and the reasons why it was adopted. The results of a PMI (plus, minus, interesting) exercise with the group yielded comments that evidenced an appreciation and understanding of the need for the adoption of a more focused and critical stance on evaluation in the context in which we presently operate. The areas of concern were most commonly grouped around how we approach the criticality issue and not stray into criticism, how they engage with staff outside the process and the development of critical thinking. These initial findings were used to shape the subsequent professional learning sessions before using each school as a platform for the model.

To help with the PLCSE process in host schools a PLCSE planning tool was developed to help shape collegiate discussions, supported by an action plan to evaluate practice

and helped clarify next steps. Each school highlighted an area for evaluation e.g. the process of teacher feedback and set out their own evaluative position of this area. A selection of pertinent research articles were issued to each team to consider before the visit to facilitate reflection on what good practice might look like in that focus area.

Evaluation and impact

After the first two professional learning sessions participants were asked to reflect on what they had heard and discussed concerning PLCSE. A reflective tool was developed to help participants critically evaluate their own learning during the process. Comments included “chance for quality reflection” (Teacher A); “rigorous evaluation of change” (Teacher B); “the end of silo thinking” (Teacher C); “to see ourselves as others see us (Teacher D). This was based on two aspects of the Standard for Career Long Professional Learning (CLPL) GTCS (2012) namely Enquiry and Research and Sustaining and Developing Professional Learning. It was clear from the returns that all participants placed a high value on their professional learning value from what they had experienced so far. From a small sample it was evidenced that colleagues gained most in three areas of the Standard for CLPL: developing knowledge, understanding and skill in practitioner enquiry, the development of the skills of critical self –evaluation and to lead and contribute to the professional learning of colleagues. The area that was least developed was the application of research and its impact on education. A survey of the reflections after the school visits indicate a deep shift in colleagues understanding, for example:

“I am now asking, why are we doing what we do?” (Teacher B)

“The process has already encouraged me to be more reflective and critical of my own practice” (Teacher C)

“This has improved my evidence gathering ability” (Teacher F)

“It has allowed for self-discovery and growth within a positive framework” (Teacher G)

“I have better questioning skills” (Teacher H)

Furthermore, the head teacher of the partner school commented “this process has captured the imagination of participants and has started to raise the bar in terms of deeper thinking as well as the breakdown in any barriers that prevent closer collaboration.” (Headteacher 1)

Considering this evidence, it is reasonable to claim that there is a professional value of this process and that participants have undergone an internal shift in their approach to inputting into the system through their active participation. Observations of the team indicated an energy, focus and emotional change as they involved themselves in critical collegueship activities. From my perspective they had become bolder in their approach to questioning practice compared to earlier sessions. This development of leadership capacities and approaches indicated increased teacher agency and a desire to play their part in improving the system.

Recommendations and conclusions

I suggest the following changes could be instigated to improve the system to implement the Peer Led Critical Self Evaluation model

A At systems level: promote an understanding of critical collegueship.

- i) Develop Professional Support Groups (PSGs) so they become arenas of criticality with a focus on current research and robust peer evaluation
- ii) Develop and support a more in depth understanding of the layers of critical thinking and explore different critical reflection models
- iii) Enable access to educational research. There could be a role for a Scottish Research Exchange with a clear expectation at local level for analysing research, summarising and signposting to colleagues.

B At local authority/cluster level: Embed leadership pathways

- i) Develop PLCSE as a recognised and accredited leadership pathway that will be set within the Aberdeenshire Strategic Leadership framework
- ii) Form cross- cluster teams of colleagues to supplement and/ or replace authority instigated evaluations through responding to host school invitations to carry out “real time” evaluation and feedback to facilitate informed critical reflection and subsequent modification.
- iii) Develop critical pairings of faculties across clusters to provide a test bed for innovation and the promotion of teacher agency.

C At school level: Develop the climate in schools for critical collegueship to flourish

- (i) Build a focus on criticality and reflection through purposeful professional learning

- (ii) Ensure access to research data within schools by making a research and development role explicit in a schools leadership structure
- (iii) Create expectation that schools will engage in critical self-evaluation of other contexts as part of their work

It is too early to draw firm conclusions on the impact of PLCSE, however, what is emerging is the recognition of a growing need for further professional learning about criticality in the reflective process. This is pertinent, especially in the light of the changes in school governance and the increased accountability of local leadership. I believe a more “mature” system will promote teacher agency leading to greater ownership of improvement. Furthermore, this maturity of robust critical evaluation would benefit the system through the growth of an inclusive leadership culture across the profession leading to improved student outcomes.

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