

SHOULD EDUCATIONAL
LEADERSHIP FOCUS ON
'BEST PRACTICE' OR
'NEXT PRACTICE'?

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**“Learning and innovation go hand in hand.
The arrogance of success is to think that what you did yesterday
will be sufficient for tomorrow.” William Pollard**

The argument in this paper can be stated simply. The question posed is a false dichotomy. It is never going to be either/or. All leaders need to focus on improvement strategies – although the concept of ‘best’ practice is not unproblematic. However, some leaders, some of the time, must focus on innovation. If they do not, the alternative is stasis or change dynamics which arise from outside practice, thus failing to optimise the informed creativity of practitioners.

Educational leaders are beset on all sides by conflicting priorities. They are exhorted to raise standards and to foster creativity; to focus on learning, but also attend to the needs of the whole child; to be future focused, but also to ensure that the imperatives of today’s demands are met. As every experienced leader knows, the critical issue is one of exercising good judgement. What are the really key priorities in *this* context, at *this* point in time? And how many priorities can be sustained at any one time?

The guiding principle seems perhaps not too contentious. Educational leaders should focus on those strategies which will optimise learning for their young people and their communities. Communities cannot be left out of the picture in the light of increasing evidence that the impact of family and community characteristics and norms can outweigh much that a school attempts. This understanding has been underpinned, in England, by the holistic approach of the government's policy on *Every Child Matters* with its emphasis on five broad outcomes not the single one of academic standards; and the associated drive for extended (community), full service schools. It’s useful to reflect on how recently such perspectives were not at all taken for granted. In England at least, it is but a decade ago that the prevailing orthodoxy (though not without its dissidents) was for the pre-eminent focus on academic standards. Contexts were ‘no excuses’.

When resources are limited, how is the balance to be struck between meeting the variety of young people’s needs? How are the needs of the socially and culturally deprived, the academically gifted, those with special needs, and so on, to be met on an equitable basis? These ethical, as well as practical, decisions confront leaders in state education on a daily basis. They need sound professional preparation to deal with them, as well as an ongoing support infrastructure within which they can reflect upon the outcomes of choices and their effects.

Best practice

These larger dilemmas are relevant when it comes to considering the apparent dichotomy between focusing on ‘best’ and ‘next’ practice. We know that, in addition to the unacceptably wide range of overall achievement and value added between schools, there exists a serious problem of within-school variation. To address this problem and raise the quality of educational experience for young people in whatever school they attend, we clearly need to find more effective means of

transferring knowledge, both theoretical and practical, between schools and practitioners. A first and apparently logical response to this challenge is to seek to identify 'best practice'; to codify it; and subsequently ensure that all the relevant practitioners in the domain in question (whether it be a curricular/pedagogical, technological; managerial, or leadership field) become familiar with it and then adopt it with high levels of fidelity. In a sense this is the theory of action which underpinned the first iteration of the national literacy strategy in England.

The first issue to consider in respect of the notion of 'best' practice is: says who? We naturally want the concept of 'best practice' to be founded on sound evidence, not group-think, unreflective habit, or political diktat.

The literature is now replete with critiques of this approach. In the first place, the concept of 'best practice' in itself has been problematised. There appear to be at least two issues. The first is the degree of confidence which can be gained from the evidence adduced to support a given practice: let us say phonics in the teaching of literacy, or the practice of the local management of schools. The reality is that, often, the levels of confidence are not as high as might be wished. The 'gold standard' of random control trials is not often met in educational research. Findings are very often contested. Moreover in discussing *best* practice, one needs to be able to point to evidence demonstrating, not just efficacy of a given approach, but also its superiority over other approaches in the same or very similar circumstances. This is not to say that the research community has not made powerful efforts to improve this situation and overcome the problems inherent in the evaluation of educational practices and policies. The rise of research review methodologies and greater technical sophistication will no doubt assist. We want school leaders to be evidence-aware when deciding on policies and preferred practices for their organisations, but the reality is that they are justified in regarding a great deal of it as provisional. There is, moreover, the inevitable challenge of adaptation to context. How far can or should fidelity to the original model be modified in order to fit different circumstances without 'throwing the baby out with the bathwater'?

Secondly, there is the challenge associated with achieving transfer of a given practice across classrooms, schools or sites. This is fundamentally about the degree to which education professionals are capable of becoming true lifelong learners who are not just capable of critiquing and adapting their practice in the light of evidence but are actually hungry to do so.

The quest to determine what are really 'best' practices in given domains may be of less importance perhaps than being able to identify a range of practices which may be said with confidence to be effective and under what conditions. So what is needed is the encouragement of a culture of enquiry amongst leaders and practitioners, directed at determining the selection appropriate to context and conditions.

However, even assuming all these problems can be overcome, the identification of best or good practice, and its successful take-up and transfer across all schools would still be insufficient to achieve the kind of transformational reform which is increasingly recognised as essential to meet the demands of the 21st century. If that

is accepted, the question becomes: what are to be the sources of innovation in learning?

Next practice

In England the work of The Innovation Unit¹ is predicated on the view that practitioners in schools (at both classroom and leadership level) are rich and indeed critical sources of innovative ideas and practice. The concept of 'next' practice captures this approach (Hannon, 2006). By next practice we mean:

- significantly changed methods of service delivery, organisation or structure, which if shown to be successful would hold implications for the wider system;
- in advance of hard evidence of effectiveness;
- not (yet) officially sanctioned; and therefore maybe entailing some risk;
- consciously designed with an awareness of the strengths and limitations of conventional 'best' practice;
- generated by very able, informed practitioners aware of the existing knowledge base;
- informed by critical scanning of the wider environment;
- directed at serious, contemporary problems;
- user focused.

Next practices – emergent innovations that could open up new ways of working – are much more likely to come from thoughtful, experienced, self-confident practitioners trying to find new and more effective solutions to intractable problems.

Let us consider some real cases.

Yewlands is a family of seven schools involving one secondary, one special and five primary, based in a challenging and mainly urban context on the northern edge of the city of Sheffield in the middle of England. The schools have been working as an advanced collaborative for four years, including shared staffing, joint leadership appointments and cross-phase curriculum development projects. Their aspiration for their next practice field trial is to construct a 21st century model of leadership and governance across the family. They describe this as a 'paradigm shift' in the leadership of the family, in succession planning and in the collective culture of learning.

These leaders are at the forefront of creating next practice. 'Best' practice is of very limited value to them, other than providing some starting points. And the form of system leadership they are creating will be vital in the evolution from the 'one-school-one-leader' model from the 19th century.

Bridgemary Community Sports College in Gosport, Hampshire (in southern England) is a large comprehensive College for 1,080 students aged 11-16. When it joined the Innovation Unit's *Next Practice in Resourcing Personalisation* project in 2006, it was struggling with high levels of problem families. Many students come from areas with significant social deprivation, high unemployment, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, along with low expectations of education. There are many

young carers at the College and 40% have special needs ('unstatemented' in the English system, meaning that they are not so severe as to require either admission to a special school or legal entitlement to additional assistance).

To tackle this, since September, the College has adopted a system of learning windows so students can select the times of day when they know they can learn best. This is sustained by an innovative curriculum and extensive e-learning opportunities. Radical changes to the timetable together with personalised curricula for individual students are intended to ensure a student's life experiences can be recognised and accredited as learning. Provision is made for students who choose to be in or out of college, attending a local further education or training course, or taking two hours during the day to look after siblings before continuing working virtually or back in college outside traditional hours.

The college is looking at a variety of ways to support personalised learning for all students. Rather than having an exclusive e-learning group, located outside the school building, or within a specially designed suite, the college has decided to include it in everyone's learning. The head of ICT and technicians have adapted an element of their existing system '*Virtual Rucksack*' in order to make it suitable for uploading students' work. The science department are trialling it and collecting student feedback.

The college is also working on managing the complexities of registration and attendance within a 24/7 model and vertical learning school. They have found it easier to create individual timetables for students to accommodate their subject choices and mixed age groupings, because few current software programmes write timetables that would fit Bridgemaury's extended day. As it has a problem with persistent absence, the college plans to use a fingerprint system to track when students are physically present both on the college site, and in individual classrooms. They are also looking at how a change from traditional tutorial time to a more flexible system of one-to-one mentoring could support personalised learning. Inspired by the university system, each member of staff will provide individual, target-focussed guidance to an allocated cohort of students within a timetable of specific slots across the year.

Finally, the key area where reliance on best practice is manifestly inadequate is in ICT. Not only are the speed and power of developments in this field transforming the very nature of the learning experience, users – young people themselves – are frequently well in advance of their 'teachers', and certainly of static models of 'best' practice. How should schools respond?

Invicta Grammar School, in Kent, also in southern England, is exploring the creative potential and application of new technologies such as mobile phones, wireless PDAs and iPods. It is discovering new ways for students to use them to demonstrate their learning and their learning process in and out of the classroom. In many cases, the students are much more at ease with the use and capabilities of these devices than their teachers. The aim is for students themselves to take ownership of their learning by designing the projects and assessment criteria.

The learning to date has indicated a further area for development: investigating whether a social networking tool makes an effective a method of recording learning and creating an e-portfolio. The open source software JOOMLA will be used to create the social network.

Conclusion

In summary, it is not argued here that a focus on 'next practice' should replace the need for leaders to deploy evidence-based strategies to improve schools. However, these are insufficient for the challenges that confront us, and it is vitally important that needed innovation arises from the work of skilled and creative practitioners – increasingly co-created in conjunction with their learners. The task of innovating 'on behalf of' the system is not for all schools all of the time; but we relegate our school leaders and practitioners to operative status unless some are charged by the system to innovate where old responses are inadequate. This is core to the renewal process are education system requires.

Reference

Hannon, V. (2006) *'Next Practice' in education: a disciplined approach to innovation*. London: The Innovation Unit.

¹ www.innovation-unit.co.uk

Endnote

This article will appear in the March 2008 edition of the Journal of Educational Change (editors Andy Hargreaves and Louise Stoll) where it will complemented by a piece from Professor Ken Littlewood.