

Self-evaluation

What's in it for schools?

John MacBeath and Archie McGlynn



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REPORT TO RECEPTION

Series editors : Kate Myers and John MacBeath

Self-evaluation

What's in it for schools?

The evaluation of schools is an inevitable part of education. The quality of schooling received by children will always be of concern to parents, teachers, the media, the government and society at large. While the evaluation of schools' performance has traditionally been the work of government inspectors and other external agencies, it is now widely believed that schools should also evaluate themselves. In *Self-evaluation: What's in it for schools?* John MacBeath and Archie McGlynn look at the forms self-evaluation in schools can take and what it can achieve. This is at once a timely and significant contribution to the debate on self-evaluation and a clear, comprehensive and practical overview of the subject. Headteachers, governors, inspectors and teacher trainers will find it invaluable.

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What's in it for schools?

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Self-evaluation: What's in it for schools?

John MacBeath and Archie McGlynn

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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	vi
<i>List of tables</i>	viii
<i>Series Editors' preface</i>	ix
1 Why evaluate schools?	1
2 Internal and external evaluation – two sides of a coin	14
3 Evaluating teaching	32
4 Evaluating learning	50
5 Evaluating ethos and culture	69
6 Benchmarking	88
7 Preparing for inspection	105
8 Evaluating leadership	121
<i>References</i>	141
<i>Index</i>	147

Figures

1.1	Illustrating value-added attainment	2
1.2	Circles of evaluation	7
1.3	Ranking audiences by importance	11
1.4	Three perspectives on evaluation	13
2.1	Four levels of evaluation	17
2.2	1. Clarity of purposes	26
3.1	Kounin's dimensions of classroom management	37
3.2	Threshold criteria	43
3.3	Items from the German questionnaire	44
3.4	Evaluation: learning and teaching	45
3.5	A class evaluates its teacher	47
3.6	Who evaluates – pluses and minuses	48
4.1	Comparing a learning and a performance orientation	51
4.2	The spot check	55
4.3	Examples of pupil, teacher and observer ratings on the spot check	57
4.4	Comparison of expectation and satisfaction	58
4.5	Graph of one pupil's engagement over a fifty-minute period	59
5.1	Ethos and culture	72
5.2	Ethos indicators – an introduction	76
5.3	Evaluating school ethos – the school as it is	77
5.4	Teacher questionnaire (ISEP)	78
5.5	The change profile	80
5.6	The self-evaluation profile (SEP)	81
6.1	Benchmarks, indicators and targets – what do they mean?	90

6.2	Indicators, benchmarks and targets – a flow chart	91
6.3	Comparing like with like	93
6.4	School, authority and national performance	94
6.5	The balance of command, consultation and consensus	95
6.6	Qualitative and quantitative measures	99
6.7	Benchmarking from broad view to closer look	100
7.1	The ‘table mat’ exercise	119
8.1	Drawing depicting leadership	124
8.2	‘Me as I am’	131
8.3	‘Me as I would like to be’	133
8.4	How good is leadership in our school?	136
8.5	Qualities of leadership – self-rating	137
8.6	Formal and informal leadership	140

Tables

4.1	Evaluating relevant thinking – by ability	60
4.2	What pupils were doing – by ability group	61
6.1	Comparison of teachers’ ratings of importance and actuality	97
6.2	Individual school data as compared with all schools in the project	98
8.1	Quantitative and qualitative studies of leadership	128

Series Editors' preface

Kate Myers and John MacBeath

Series introduction

There is a concerted move to raise standards in the public education system. The aim is laudable. Few people would disagree with it. However, there is no clear agreement about what we mean by 'standards'. Do we mean attainment or achievement more broadly defined, for example, and how we are to raise whatever it is we agree needs raising?

At the same time, there appears to be an increasing trend towards approaching changes in education through a controlling, rational and technical framework. This framework tends to concentrate on educational content and delivery and ignores the human resource perspective and the complexity of how human beings live, work and interact with one another. It overemphasizes linearity and pays insufficient attention to how people respond to change and either support or subvert it.

Recent government initiatives, including the National Curriculum, OfSTED school and LEA inspections, assessment procedures, league tables, target-setting, literacy and numeracy hours, and performance management have endorsed this framework. On occasions this has been less to do with the content of 'reforms' than the process of implementation – that is, doing it 'to' rather than 'with' the teaching profession. Teachers are frequently treated as the problem rather than part of the solution, with the consequence that many feel disillusioned, demoralised and disempowered. Critics of this *top-down* approach are often seen as lacking rigour, complacent about standards, and uninterested in raising achievement.

We wanted to edit this series because we believe that you can be passionate about public education, about raising achievement, about

ensuring that all pupils are entitled to the best possible education that society is able to provide – whatever their race, sex or class. We also believe that achieving this is not a simple matter of common sense or of the appliance of science – it is more complex than that. Most of all, we see the teaching profession as an important part of the solution to finding ways through these complexities.

What's in it for schools? is a series that will make educational policy issues relevant to practitioners. Each book in the series focuses on a major educational issue and raises key questions, such as:

- can inspection be beneficial to schools?
- how can assessment procedures help pupils learn?
- how can school self-evaluation improve teaching and learning?
- what impact does leadership in the school have in the classroom?
- how can school improvement become classroom improvement?

The books are grounded in sound theory, recent research evidence and best practice, and aim to:

- help you to make meaning personally and professionally from knowledge in a given field;
- help you to seek out practical applications of an area of knowledge for classrooms and schools;
- help those of you who want to research the field in greater depth, by providing key sources with accessible summaries and recommendations.

In addition, each chapter ends with a series of questions for reflection or further discussion, enabling schools to use the books as a resource for whole-school staff development.

We hope that the books in this series will show you that there are ways of raising achievement that can take account of how schools grow and develop and how teachers work and interact with one another. *What's in it for schools?* – a great deal, we think!

1 Why evaluate schools?

Why evaluate schools? Why not leave them alone to do what they do best, to get on with the business of teaching and learning?

The answer is simple. There is no alternative. For as long as we have had schools we have evaluated them. We have not always done it well or systematically. It has often been intuitive, off the cuff, a matter of hearsay and reputation. And what have often been widely regarded as good schools have benefited from mythology and mystique. Evaluating the quality of schools is not just the researcher's province. It has always been an element in people's everyday vocabulary. Whatever the nature of their judgements, the quality of schools has for many years been a matter of concern to most parents, some of whom put their child's name down for 'a good school' even before their child is born. Virtually every parent wants his or her child to have 'a good education' and that is often equated with sending him or her to a 'good' school.

But what lies beneath the comment 'It's a good school'? What meanings are attached to that judgement, and what differing forms do meanings take when pronounced by a politician, a journalist, an inspector, a pupil, a researcher, or a parent recommending their own child's school to a neighbour? And what is the difference between a 'good' school and an 'effective' one?

How good is effectiveness?

The term 'effective' has passed imperceptibly into our everyday vocabulary and into policy dialogue. It is often used synonymously with 'good', so concealing a multitude of possible meanings. For the purist researcher,

2 Self-evaluation

effectiveness is a measurement of progress over and above what might have been predicted from pupils' background characteristics and prior attainment. That is what is commonly referred to as the 'added value' which is the mark of an effective school as against a 'good' one. By this definition, a school is effective when it surpasses the predictions about the future success of its pupils. The 'value' that is added is normally a reference to extra unpredicted attainment that exceeded the forecast of prior attainment or baseline measurement. It is what appears 'above the line' on any graph which compares attainment at two points in time (as in Figure 1.1).

A decade or so ago teachers in the United Kingdom might have been baffled by such statistical wizardry, but third-millennium schools have had to familiarise themselves with this way of thinking about their work and this way of measuring their success. However, most teachers, most researchers and policy-makers too, regard such a measure of success as only partial and potentially misleading. It is hard to see how any school could be called effective without broader measures of achievement such as improved attitudes, motivation, raised esteem and difficult-to-measure skills such as learning to learn. The more we stretch the definition of effectiveness, however, the more difficult it becomes to see the difference

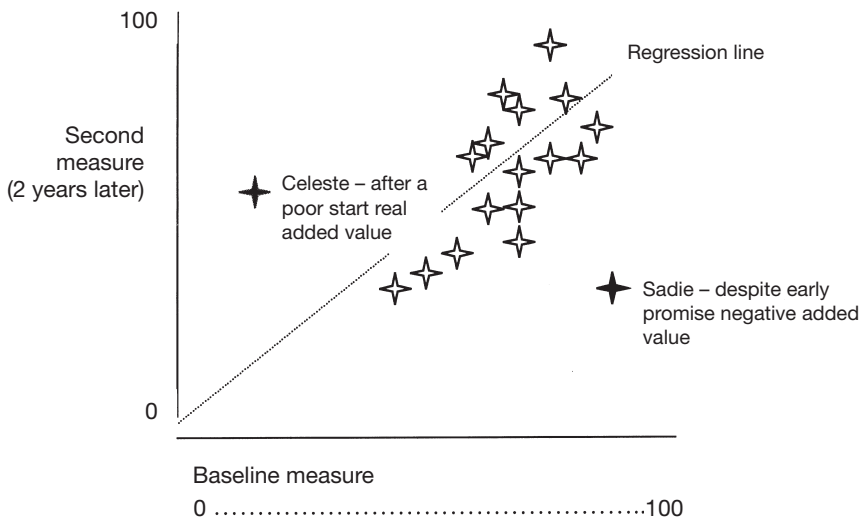


Figure 1.1 Illustrating value-added attainment

between the 'good' and the 'effective', and it is difficult to see how an effective school could not be good and a good school not effective.

Good schools and effective schools are, ultimately, a matter of perspective. They depend on the criteria we use for our judgement, however implicit or explicit these criteria are. All judgements are made in a context, within a culture and within a linguistic convention. All our evaluations subsume clusters of value judgements, beliefs and opinions. Sometimes these are so deeply embedded in our thinking and discourse that they are not open to question. Some value judgements are taken as so fundamental to human life and well-being that they are beyond question. For example, no one is prepared to contest that learning is a good thing, that age is a significant factor in deciding what children should and shouldn't know, or that children's behaviour and beliefs should be shaped by adults. In other words, there is a moral base on which school education is allowed to rest and that moral base is a virtually universal one.

What is good about good schools?

Going beyond these unquestioned taken-as-read value judgements there is a fairly solid core of agreement on what is good about schools. Irrespective of culture we prefer orderly to disorderly schools, well-managed to badly-managed schools, schools in which pupils show progress over time, schools in which teachers monitor and assess how well their pupils are doing. We believe that parents are necessary and valued co-educators and that children learn best when there is some form of bridge between home and school learning. We believe that learning has a social dimension and that it is good for children to cooperate with and learn from one another.

These are generally undisputed characteristics, or benchmarks, of good schools. They are ones which we continually monitor and measure in the day-to-day life of schools and classrooms. We do this mostly in a subjective or intuitive fashion, only becoming concerned when these basic tenets are breached in some way. Our consensus on common values might progress quite a distance before we begin to diverge in our judgements, but we sooner or later do reach a point where our opinions begin to become more contested. These differences become progressively more acute across different national contexts, cultures and ethnic languages.

4 *Self-evaluation*

Yet even beneath a common language and a common national culture lie some quite different understandings of the emphasis and priority that ought to be given to some values as against others. We reach a point too where we begin to dissect the common language and discover that it sometimes conceals more than it reveals.

Virtually everyone wants schools in which children respect their teachers, but what does 'respect' mean? Everyone believes that pupils should behave well, but can they agree on what constitutes 'good' behaviour? Order is inherently preferable to disorder, but how do we distinguish one from the other? Is someone's disorder another's order? Highly interactive noisy classrooms may be underpinned by order which is not apparent at first sight and a highly ordered classroom may conceal beneath its surface slow educational death.

What may have appeared at first sight to be simple and common-sensical turns out to be so complex that it is tempting to abandon systematic evaluation and trust to the sound professional judgement of each individual teacher or headteacher. However, it is the very complexity of what makes for good, and less good, schools that makes evaluation compelling, significant and worth pursuing.

The 'pursuing' of evaluation has, historically, come from three main directions:

- from the top down, driven by political pressures, nationally and internationally, to assure quality and deliver value for money;
- from the bottom up, stimulated by schools seeking strategies and tools for self-improvement;
- from sideways on, from researchers and commentators, in particular school effectiveness research which has, over three decades, pursued inquiry into what makes schools effective and what it is that helps schools improve.

These three strands of development are virtually impossible to disentangle in simple cause-and-effect terms. Researchers could not have produced their findings without the insights and collaboration of teachers. Policy-makers relied on researchers to lend authority to their pronouncements. Research and policy fed back into school and classroom practice. And, as in the natural order of things, the implicit becomes gradually more explicit, the informal becomes formal and evaluation is discovered, and rediscovered, from generation to generation.

The Germans have a word, '*Zeitgeist*', to describe a climate of ideas whose time has come. The need for better, more systematic, evaluation of schools is a third millennium global zeitgeist. It finds a common meeting ground of schools and authorities, policy-makers and politicians, researchers and academics. There is an emerging consensus among these various groups and across nations that we want to get better at evaluation because it is good for pupils, for parents and for teachers because without it what is learned is simply a matter of hunch, guesswork and opinion.

Beneath this happy consensus, however, lie some deeply contested issues. Evaluation is a good thing, but who should do it? We all want better evaluation, but what should be evaluated? Evaluation is necessary, but when and how should it be carried out? Evaluation is beneficial, but who is it for?

Who should evaluate?

A decade or so ago we might have answered this with a simple retort – Her Majesty's Inspectors. Or perhaps, we might have entrusted this to local education authority inspectors or advisers. In 2002 a more common answer to the question would be: 'Schools themselves'. There does, however, appear to be an emerging consensus that the most satisfactory answer to the question is both. Both internal and external evaluation have complementary roles to play. (This is the theme we explore in chapter 2.)

What should we evaluate?

Evaluating schools has been a major thrust of policy in the last two decades in the UK. It has drawn heavily on the work of school-effectiveness researchers and their three-decade-long pursuit of the question 'What makes an effective school?' with assumptions built into that question that have been increasingly challenged by others from different fields of inquiry (see, for example, Thrupp, 1999).

Effectiveness research has taken the school as the unit of analysis, working on the assumption that a school as an entity makes a critical difference, and that going to school A as against school B is a prime determinant of life chances. Inspection and reporting in all UK countries has similarly taken the school as the unit of analysis and reported publicly