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PLANNING IMPACT RESEARCH: ISSUES AND DILEMMAS

Anjum Halai

Introduction

Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development (AKU-IED) was established in 1993. The purpose of establishing AKU-IED and the MEd programme offered by it was to develop models of school improvement through further training and professional development of teachers. Hence, AKU-IED's initial objective was to establish a master's degree programme of quality to develop teachers who would lead whole school improvement. Approaching its tenth year there was a need felt by faculty at AKU-IED, and articulated by other stake holders such as the University's Board of Trustees, to document through systematic research, evidence of impact of AKU-IED inputs. In August 2001, AKU-IED invited Dr. Stephen Anderson, Associate Professor, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, to help begin the process of developing a strategic plan for impact evaluation studies at AKU-IED. Dr. Anderson came up with a report putting forward an Impact Action Plan with eight proposals to move further with the conduct of impact evaluation studies at AKU-IED (Anderson, 2001). Subsequently, a group of faculty began to meet regularly as a 'Working Group on Action Plan for Impact Studies' to deliberate on issues pertaining to the study of the impact of teacher education inputs on the schools and the classrooms.

As a result of the work undertaken on the Impact Action Plan a number of impact studies were undertaken at AKU-IED. However, our experience of designing and conducting impact studies raised a number of issues, which I discuss below.

Issues and Questions in Impact Research

Impact as measurable outcomes

To study impact is a difficult endeavor for a number of reasons. A major difficulty is in the dominant philosophy underlying the notion of impact of teaching interventions as "measurable outputs". For example in the current debate in the UK on 'Evidence-Based Teaching', evidence is seen as measurable outcomes. This notion of evidence is based on the problematic assumption that social practices are activities which need to be justified

as effective and efficient means of producing desirable outcomes, and that means and ends are linked directly and causally linked. Furthermore, the determination of means requires a clear, precise pre-specification of ends as tangible and measurable outputs or targets, which constitute quality standards against which the performance of social practitioners is to be judged (Elliot, 2001, p. 560).

Impact as Process of Change

However, social situations are such that variables are in a complex relationship so that variables can neither be isolated nor a direct causal link be established. Instead, impact of an intervention in a social setting such as a school could be seen as a process of change that cannot be assessed simply by measuring “current practice and outcomes”, because of the uncertainty about what prior inputs, implementation processes, and contextual factors actually explain why things are the way they are. It is important to explore the “process of change” intervening between the source/inputs and the current practices and status, and the contextual factors influencing the change process in an interactive way throughout the history of the implementation. This would enable an understanding of the process of implementation of the intervention along with the outcomes of the intervention.

Hence, it is essential to problematise the dominant notion of impact as measurable outcomes. Methodologically, for this purpose it would be important to look at actually what happens in the classrooms to understand why the intervention works or does not work. Evidence from case studies and studies using qualitative methodologies could be used to help illuminate why particular interventions are effective i.e. the process issues or the reasons why particular programmes or participant characteristics seem to have an effect on outcomes. One such example is the recently launched research project “Case studies of school improvement in Pakistan”. As part of this research, faculty members at AKU-IED are engaged in studying the school as a unit. Schools in the study are carefully chosen from a range of cooperating schools working in collaboration with AKU-IED. A sampling criterion is that the schools be high input schools i.e. schools where AKU-IED has made substantial inputs over a period of time. A purpose is to study the school improvement initiatives undertaken and understand the impact or lack of.

Methodologically, action research studies are also appropriate to provide evidence of impact of interventions because typically they document the process of implementation and of problem solving in the context. At AKU-IED, action research studies undertaken for studying ongoing impact, and reported in this volume, include Halai, Ali, Kirmani,

and Muhammad (2003) and Dean et al. (2003).

Logical Model of Programme Inputs and Outcomes

In his proposal for an Impact action plan at AKU-IED, Professor Stephen Anderson, suggested developing a logical frameworks model. This model is based on the premise that change in student outcomes is logically dependent upon a linked series of prior changes connected to AKU-IED inputs, and that a genuine picture and explanation of the “impact of AKU-IED” would have to explore the nature of impact on these intervening types of variables in the chain.

Subsequently, I developed along with a group of colleagues this logical model of the programme inputs at AKU-IED, their expected outcomes, and the intervening and moderating variables that would need to be taken into account in order to see the impact of the programme inputs on student outcomes.

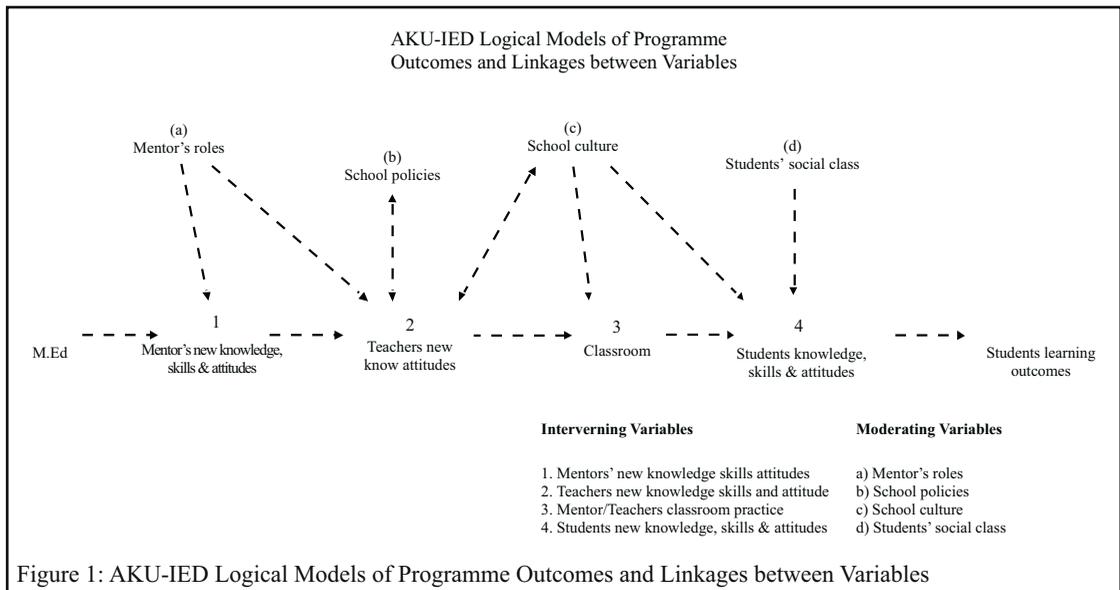


Figure 1 above shows a model of the intervening and moderating variables in the case of the master's programme. By intervening variables I mean variables that mediate the programme inputs before the programme effect is seen on the final beneficiary i.e. student outcomes. The intervening variables are the potential areas of impact. For example, in the case of the MEd programme; the intervening variables identified so far include: (1)

MEd students' (mentor's) new knowledge, skills, and attitudes; (2) Teachers' (whom the graduates work with) new knowledge, skills, attitudes (3) MEd Graduates' and/or Teachers' classroom practice; and, (4) Students' new knowledge, skills, and attitudes. However, when the graduates went out to work in the field they took up a variety of roles and responsibilities. Also, the contexts that the graduates worked in were different in a number of ways. But, the decisions regarding the roles that returning graduates would play were not always taken by themselves. Instead they were either decisions taken by other stakeholders in the school or as Halai (1998) found that certain roles were ascribed to the mentors because of the teachers and principals' prior experiences or the ambiguity surrounding the returning mentors' role. Thus, the roles that these mentors took up in the field were moderating or influencing the action and potential impact of their work in the field. Similarly, Khamis (2000) and Jaworski (1996) maintain that the mentors returned to contexts which were different in terms of their readiness to support them in their efforts to initiate change. Hence, these factors such as role variations and contextual differences are moderating variables. By showing the potential areas of impact that mediate the final effect and the moderating variables this model demonstrates how problematic the notion of impact as linear and causal. It shows the significance of studying the 'process of implementation' of teacher education inputs to be able to understand what changes and why.

To conclude, as the action plan for conducting impact studies at AKU-IED went ahead, a number of issues were identified pertaining to the notion of impact, and its methodological implications for studying impact. As a result of these deliberations it is becoming apparent that a simple model of teacher education inputs causally linked to improved student outcomes in the form of better test scores is not a viable model for studying impact.