Book Chapters

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The impact of studying impact a discussion paper

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THE IMPACT OF STUDYING IMPACT
A DISCUSSION PAPER

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'Impact' names the new hegemony: its presumptions and pretensions need to be more closely examined than seems to have been the case thus far. (Fielding, 2003, p. 294)

Introduction

The issue of what counts as impact has been raised by authors of several recent research studies and position papers on impact and/or evaluation of professional development programmes (e.g. Gusky, 2002; Davies & Preston, 2002; Retallick & Mithani, in press). The problems of evidencing impact have also been identified by various researchers engaged in the study of impact, mainly of programs of teacher or professional development (Halai, 2002; Flecknoe, 2002; Burchell, Dyson, & Rees, 2002). Consequently it is now generally accepted that studying impact is not a linear process but more complex due to 'distance' and intervening variables between 'inputs' and 'outcomes' which are mediated by, amongst other things, the specific characteristics of the 'recipient(s)' at the level of individuals, the school and/or the systemic level.

Fielding (2003) draws our attention to two additional issues in examining 'The impact of impact'. First, the 'language' of impact:

> The language of 'impact', whether it is used in a research context or any other social and political arena, foregrounds some things and marginalizes others and we need to be aware of what is affected by this. My sense is that it valorises what is short-term, readily visible and easily measurable. My sense is also that it has difficulty comprehending and valuing what is complex and problematic, what is uneven and unpredictable, what requires patience and tenacity. My sense is that it finds difficulty in distinguishing between levels of change, between what is fairly superficial and what is, to coin another overly over-used, increasingly presumptuous phrase 'transformational', between what in the management literature, is second order rather than first order change (p. 289).

Fielding further goes on to emphasise that language matters, "because in naming it celebrates and excludes, not just in the words it uses, but in the conceptual networks that give meaning to our wider activities and aspiration" (p. 293).

Secondly, he is concerned that the focus on impact will draw us further into "the mindset and practices of performativity" that, in his opinion, have already had a detrimental effect on the "young people of this country [UK]" (p. 289).

At the methodological level, there are also several issues that deserve our attention. The purpose of this discussion paper is to identify some issues relating to the validity of data as it is jointly constructed by the researcher and research participants. More specifically, two issues have been highlighted in this paper. They are: 1) Socially acceptable responses; and 2) the role(s) and 'identity' of the researcher and the relationship between the researcher/mentor and 'clients' influenced by the complex set of 'networks' of which the researcher and researched are members. These issues have arisen specifically in the context of developing AKU-IED's impact research project titled 'Case studies of school improvement' in selected cooperating schools[1] and the research project to study the impact of the Whole School Improvement program of AKU-IED's Professional Development Centre in the Northern Areas of Pakistan (henceforth referred to as the WSIP study) in both of which I am involved as a researcher. Finally, some possible 'solutions' or ways in which we are trying to address these issues in the two research projects mentioned above will be shared to invite discussion from the audience.

Socially acceptable responses

Observer's paradox is a well known phenomenon in educational research. Even when the observers wish to be 'the fly on the wall', they cannot escape the effect of their presence in the room on the behaviour patterns and actions as they unfold during the process of observation. In qualitative research it is therefore recommended that observations be done over an extended period of time to counter the observer's effect. A similar 'effect' seems to be at work in studying impact of educational reforms, particularly at the level of schools and systems which have close and longer-term links with an institution, in this case AKU-IED, which has been instrumental in capacity building for the sample schools. This was first brought to my notice recently when we were trying to find out, quite informally, how teachers in a research and development project in a cooperating

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1 A cooperating school is a school with which AKU-IED has worked for school improvement through capacity building of its teachers and Heads through its various programs.

school of AKU-IED found the experience of participating in the project, mainly in terms of their personal and professional growth. The responses were very positive and rather contrary to the overall research findings. It seemed that the participants were merely giving socially acceptable responses. In my view, this tendency to give socially acceptable responses is exacerbated in impact studies due to the fact that impact evaluation is often linked to funding issues such as decisions about its continuity or withdrawal by donors or 'external' change agents[2]. Alternatively, the participants might feel a genuine sense of obligation towards the 'sponsors' (e.g. AKU-IED or PDCN) who have invested so much of their time, effort and money in introducing school improvement initiatives in their schools and/or systems. Hence there could very well be a feeling that unless some positive effect can be shown they might be held accountable for not 'cooperating' or using the given resources well. Consequently, they might 'see' things differently, in this case more positively, or highlight the achievements only for face-saving thereby influencing the kind of data generated or constructed with the researcher.

Researcher-researched 'identity' and relationships

Who should be engaged in an impact study? In qualitative research it is now widely accepted that the researcher is the main instrument of research as data includes not simply things seen 'objectively' but as 'filtered' through the specific lens of the researcher which can be influenced by a variety of factors such as his/her previous experiences. Similarly, the relationship between the researcher and researched is considered extremely important for getting 'valid' data.

As mentioned above, often impact studies are sponsored by external change agents and/or donor agencies, i.e. people who have financed and/or supported the development and implementation of the reform effort whose impact is being studied. Thus consultants or complete 'outsiders' are brought in for brief visits to study the impact of these educational reforms and reports are quickly produced to facilitate decision making about funding future educational reforms in the same or different areas. The assumption is that the findings of these evaluation studies are both valid and reliable for the purpose of informed decision-making. A second scenario is where the actors themselves engage in studying the impact of a 'reform effort', mainly at the level of classroom techniques or strategies

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2 For example, currently PDCN has allocated a large number of resources to its Whole School Improvement program. The findings of the WSIP impact study may not directly affect the sample schools but would certainly inform future decision-making in regard to resource allocation for this program/model of school improvement both by PDCN and the donors.

through action research (see for example, Retallick & Mithani, in press; Dean et al., 2003; Halai, Ali, Kirmani, & Muhammad, 2003). Now let's consider a third scenario: the focus of the change effort here is a school and the change agents from the University or its associate professional development centre have engaged in frequent and close interactions with the stakeholders not only in introducing the reform but also in supporting its implementation and institutionalization over an extended period of time consequently developing close links with all the stakeholders in the process. The question is: if faculty from AKU-IED and PDCN undertake to study the impact of their change efforts on an ongoing basis, would their role as mentor conflict with their researcher role - the former being developmental in nature while the latter focuses more on 'appraisal' and 'evaluation' and is, therefore, more judgmental in some sense? If the study is undertaken after the 'project is over, to what extent will the data be 'corrupted' by the role-shift from mentor to an impact researcher? For example, in the recently completed research and development study on building communities of practice (CoP) in selected schools over a period of two years, several participants from AKU-IED's cooperating schools shared that they had immense problems in accepting the role of CoP members from AKU-IED as 'equal' instead of the more usual and expected role of an 'expert'. In fact initially some of them were almost afraid of the 'people from AKU-IED' considering them as evaluators of their performance and it took a very long time to build relationships of trust and confidence amongst the participants for them to share their classroom stories and engage in collaborative inquiry on their practice (Farah & Shamim, forthcoming).

Thus, in the impact study of WSIP in Northern areas which is being undertaken after the major intervention phase has been completed in the selected project schools, we have discussed whether it would be appropriate for the 'insiders', i.e. the Professional Development Teachers(PDTs) who worked in these schools, and who already have a relationship of mutual trust and confidence with the stakeholders based on their frequent interactions with them during the different phases of the project to study the impact of their efforts in the same schools and how this might affect the quality of data collected. At the same time we have considered the possible impact of 'outsiders', i.e. researchers who do not have this advantage of previous relationship. Thus, we have debated whether there are good reasons for 'outsiders' to spend time on building these relationships to enable the joint construction of 'valid' data and to what extent can the PDTs play the role of outsider-insider? Additionally we have wondered about the extent to which the responses of the research participants will be governed by their interest in continuing their long-term relationship with colleagues from a reputable institution, in this case PDCN.

Some possible 'solutions'!

Finally, I would like to share some ways in which we are trying to address these issues in two impact studies mentioned above, i.e. the WSIP study and 'Case studies of school improvement' mainly to start a discussion on these issues and to get input from the various stakeholders represented in the audience.

In addition to a rigorous research design allowing for data collection and verification at different stages and through different sources, the participating schools in the WSIP and Case Studies of School Improvement projects have been informed that the findings of the study will not affect the current or future relationship of these schools with AKU-IED and PDCN. Moreover, it has been emphasised that the purpose of these impact studies is NOT to evaluate the participating schools but our own programs and models of school improvement. Additionally, the faculty from PDCN engaged in the WSIP study have decided to conduct their impact research in schools where they were not directly involved in professional development activities during the intervention phase of the project in order to distance themselves from their research participants or to 'make the familiar strange' for ensuring validity of the data collected. However, they still have the benefit of being 'insiders' due to their familiarity with a) the project goals and strategies for intervention; and b) stakeholders from participating schools through other forums at PDCN. Similarly, in the case studies of school improvement project, each researcher has tried to select a case (school) where they have not had frequent opportunities for interaction with the research participants recently.

I hope that the search for impact of the programmatic efforts of AKU-IED and its network of PDCs for school improvement will lead to a greater understanding of these efforts but, more importantly, to the generation of a cumulative body of knowledge on issues related to studying impact of educational reforms in varied contexts.

Acknowledgement

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