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Measuring and making impact through research into professional learning

Impact: an age-old issue

In pondering how best to approach the task of writing this editorial, I took the opportunity to peruse some of the very earliest editorials written for the journal in the mid to late seventies, when it was then called the British Journal of In-Service Education. What struck me was that while some of the terminology has changed and the context and reach of the journal has undoubtedly widened, the issues being raised by the then editors bear striking similarity to issues concerning us now, in early 2013. Indeed, comments made in the editorial for the very first issue portray a very similar economic context: 'In mid-1975 the education scene is loaded with anxiety and concern. Parents, children, school-leavers, employers and professionals alike are affected by recession and adjustments' (Lee, Johnston and Gough, 1974, p. 3).

Principal among the concerns raised in these early issues was the issue of impact of professional learning, or 'evaluation of INSET' as it was then termed. Indeed, while first mentioned explicitly in the editorial for the very first issue (ibid.), it is then returned to in two editorials in 1978 (Gough, Lee and Watkins, 1978a; Gough, Lee and Watkins, 1978b) where the editors suggest this as a focus for a special issue. Here in 2013, while we now talk of professional development or professional learning, the imperative to evaluate such activities in terms of their impact, if anything, has grown rather than diminished. This imperative is arguably fuelled by the global drive to enhance teacher competence (see OECD, 2005) and is enacted in a range of ways in different national contexts. In the US, for example, there has been significant growth in attempts to measure teacher quality through 'value added assessment', using increasingly sophisticated statistical analysis (see, for example, Chetty, Friedman and Rockoff, 2012). And in Scotland, where the policy context is quite different, there is growth in the drive to ensure that any professional development activity is evaluated in terms of its impact on pupils, as evidenced in one of the recommendations in the recent Review of Teacher Education in Scotland (Donaldson, 2010):

It is rare for CPD activities to be defined and evaluated in relation to their intended impact on pupils. More attention to assessing the value added of CPD would improve its focus, increase the likelihood of impact and improve efficiency overall. (p. 96)

So, while there is a growth, or perhaps merely a redefinition, in the emphasis placed on evaluating the impact of professional learning on pupil outcomes, there is at the same time an exponential growth in the requirement for academics to provide evidence of impact emanating from their research. This provides a two-pronged line of fruitful interrogation to follow in relation to the articles published in this issue: first, in what ways, if any, do the projects reported in this issue demonstrate a desire to provide evidence of the impact of professional learning activities, and second, in what ways, if any, do the articles make explicit reference to the intended or possible impact of the research itself. Analysis of these two issues might allow us to focus our energies on identifying how we as academics interested in professional learning wish to engage with the concept of 'impact'.

The articles selected for this issue reflect the wide range of foci and contexts that are represented in the journal as a whole, covering school education, higher education, dental and professional organisation contexts, and considering professional learning at both individual and profession-wide levels, adopting on-site, external, and technology enhanced approaches. In introducing each of the articles, I take the opportunity here to consider each in terms of the claims it makes in relation to issues of impact, both of the professional learning on learner outcomes and of the impact of the research itself in terms of influence on policy and practice.

Impact and the articles in this issue

Turner and Simon's small-scale, locally contextualised study reports on Masters graduates' reflections on their own learning, setting this in the context of a national agenda in England where government funding for Masters level provision for teachers is seriously under threat. The notion of impact is discussed explicitly in relation to the teachers' views of the impact of the Masters programme on their own professional learning and practice, in particular the impact on beliefs and understanding and the resulting shifts in practice, resulting in what Turner and Simon call 'professional assertiveness'. The article also reports, however, that the teachers did not relate the discussion of impact in terms of pupil attainment and performance. While the focus of the article is on the teachers' perceptions of their own learning, in setting the policy context out clearly, it might also be assumed that the authors aim is to create research impact in terms of contributing evidence to support enhanced investment in Masters level education for teachers.

While focusing on a very different context – Greek teachers' experiences of a technology-enhanced professional development project – Samaras and Fox also focus on the teachers' self-reporting of the impact of the experience on them. While the term 'impact' was not used explicitly, the findings do suggest some level of impact on the participants in the project. Of particular interest is the development of what Samaras and Fox refer to as 'international mindedness'. In terms of impact on pupils, the findings refer to raising of teachers' awareness of different pedagogical approaches, therefore inferring, perhaps, an impact on pupils, although there was no direct mention of this. In their conclusions, Samaras and Fox raise the question of 'longitudinal effects of such programs', hinting at the paucity of evidence that exists anywhere to illustrate longer term impact of teachers' professional development experiences.

Hamilton's article examines the process of teachers' peer-to-peer observations in a secondary school in the US, setting this particular form of professional learning in the context of the 'billions of dollars invested each year in US K-12 teacher professional development'. The implicit agenda here possibly being to provide evidence of value for money in terms of the learning gains acquired through this process compared to the financial cost of setting it up and supporting it. The study itself employed an online survey and interviews designed to explore teachers' 'perceptions and experiences'. Hamilton argues that 'although empirical research on professional development is necessary.... it is vital that we include teachers' narratives, in which they share their ideas and experiences', implicitly positioning herself in opposition to the notion of measuring impact in terms of pupil outcomes, or perhaps, to take a more measured view, asserting that pupil/student outcomes should not be the key indicator of the impact of professional learning.

Behar-Horenstein, Roberts and Zafar set out to 'explore the effectiveness of a professional development initiative [in pre-clinical dental education in the US] using organisational change research studies to frame the inquiry.' The presentation of results indicates what might be termed perceived benefits of the model, including the exchange of ideas, the development of critical thinking skills, and a range of other benefits to the patients being cared for by the student dentists, such as being treated in a more timely manner. This range of findings refers implicitly to impact on both the learners and the tutors, but also to the end-users of the professional services – the patients. Again, however, the impact discussed in the article is defined by the participant, the students and the Faculty, themselves. The article raises some

fascinating ethical issues about balancing the prioritisation of the needs of students to develop particular competences, with the care needs of particular patients being treated by the student dentists. Bluntly put, is it justifiable to prioritise the impact of a professional development activity on the professional learner over the impact on the service user (patient, pupil, student) on a short-term basis, in order to improve the quality of professional practice on a longer term basis? The authors are explicit about their intention that the lessons learned from this particular case study might impact usefully on others involved in the design of professional education programmes.

White's study explores the experiences of two school-based teacher educators (teachers with responsibility for working with school-based student teachers) in English secondary schools as they lead subject knowledge development days with student teachers. Central to the discussion is the acknowledgment that the impact of any professional development activity is influenced deeply by the teachers' existing values and beliefs about teaching; this further complicates the notion of being able to 'measure' impact. In pondering the wider impact of the article as a piece of research, it seems clear that the authors are identifying the specific English context, where teachers in schools are increasingly likely to be tasked with teaching student teachers, as one which requires much more research evidence to analyse the impact of such a policy direction.

The school as a site for professional learning is also the focus of Flitton and Warwick's paper, in which they provide an account of a school-based research and development project which focused on talk as a tool for learning. The article supports the concept of teacher research as a tool for whole school development, suggesting that such an approach, especially when collaborative in nature, has powerful outcomes. Flitton and Warwick not only talk of the impact on the teachers involved, but also on the pupils in terms of changes in their experiences as learners. While a compelling case is made for adoption of collaborative research and development work in schools, the article does not make explicit reference to any intended impact beyond the particular context of this study. Nonetheless, read by the right people, this article clearly has potential to make an impact on practice.

Edwards Groves and Rönnerman explore the link between practices of professional learning and practices of leading. They report on an international research project, considering outcomes of longer-term professional learning. The authors make explicit claims about the potential impact of this research on both administrators and policy

makers, concluding that there needs to be serious investment in 'focused teacher learning over time' in order to develop leadership capacity for educational change. Their conclusions raises questions for researchers and research funders about when to evaluate impact of professional learning activities and how best to match the evaluation with the intended outcomes of any professional learning initiatives.

Jacob et al. locate their discussion of professional development within a quite different context – that of subject interest groups within the Comparative and International Education Society. The professional learning implied in this context is wider than the role-related professional learning which is often the focus of articles in this journal. In relation to impact, the issues here are arguably also quite different given that the relationship between members and organisation leaders is a voluntary one, in contrast to the contractual relationship that is often the focus of articles in the journal. The issue of impact in this case appears to assume more of a business dimension, as evidenced by Jacob et al.'s discussion of 'outcomes' in relation to membership figures. Set alongside the other articles in this issue, Jacobs et al. prompt us to think about a wider range of potential indicators of impact, thereby leading one to raise the question about what counts as impact, and what impact, or influence, is seen to be desirable as a result of professional learning.

Recapturing the discourse

In focusing on the articles in this issue of Professional Development in Education it seems that the concept of impact is central to many of the pieces, although the term is not always used explicitly. Indeed, a number of terms are used in the general educational discourse to convey impact-related concerns: effects, effectiveness, implications, benefits, value, consequences, outcomes, influence. As the managerial discourse of both professional learning polices and of research production in universities increasingly focuses on the term impact, this is perhaps a time for those of us interested in research on professional learning to consider how best we influence the discourse. Many of the terms used in the articles in this issue reflect a more educationally-situated conception of impact, that of effect or benefit or value, for example. It is worth considering the subtle semantic difference in the choice of term employed.

Some questions arise: What does impact really mean when applied to professional learning? Is 'impact' a business term unsuited to the emotional and human work of teaching? And in relation to the impact of research on professional learning – how do

we demonstrate something so complex in terms that are perhaps not best suited to the task in hand? Do we have a view on this as an academic community or are we going to let someone else dictate? Gardner (2011) highlights nicely the need to understand impact in relation to the educational context:

In the quest for greater understanding of education processes, we are more likely to take small steps forward than make leaps of enlightenment or identify silver-bullet solutions to problems. Ultimately, our research may be transformational but as a rule it simply does not have the immediacy or clarity of impact that in other fields a new drug or technological innovation might have. (p. 544)

The collection of articles in this issue provides a range of interesting, innovative and useful insights into how we might develop professional learning practices. In terms of impact, however, it is not entirely clear how and if these will be translated by policy makers and administrators. Perhaps this is not the concern of the journal, but it is important that we as a community of academics have a clear sense of our engagement with the 'impact' conveyor belt. Do we simply want to roll along in a compliant way or do we want to switch it off and propose an alternative, more socially situated way of talking about how our research into professional learning makes a difference? There is real evidence within the articles in this and other issues in the journal of the moral imperatives innate in the work of scholars who seek to explore professional learning practices, yet the challenge remains of asserting ourselves within the research production line. This challenge is particularly difficult in financially constrained times where funding to support the kind of larger-scale international research that would boost our communal endeavour is so limited. We must therefore find ways of pooling our knowledge and making a communal impact by building on the range of smaller scale studies that we have in abundance. We see Professional Development in Education as one means of supporting this project and urge our authors, reviewers and readers to work together to build positive alliances through our shared common interest. In concluding it is worth returning to Gardner (2011) who warns that: 'Sticking our collective head in the sand and assuming that society will somehow appreciate our relevance and efforts is not the way forward. (p. 559)

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