Process and Product Issues in the Evaluation of School Development Planning

JOE O'HARA

Dublin City University, Ireland

GERRY McNAMARA

Dublin City University, Ireland

In recent years, state funded, practitioner-led organizational improvement programmes have become increasingly common within the Irish education system. Central to this new model of public funding has been the demand for extensive evaluation of each programme, a demand that has raised a number of important theoretical and practical issues for programme evaluators. The issue addressed in this article is that of the difficulty of designing approaches to evaluation which can meet the cultural and organizational needs of schools, while at the same time providing evidence as to the effective or otherwise implementation of national educational policy.

Initially, the article identifies and examines the tension that has arisen between programme funders' demand for an evaluation process that produces measurable 'outputs' and the programme participants' demand that the evaluation be sensitive to the specific cultural climate and needs of the organization under investigation.

An approach to overcoming these conflicting demands arising out of a project where such problems became central to the process of evaluation is suggested. This approach grew out of the distinction drawn by Habermas (1972) between practical and emancipatory knowledge and was developed in light of Daly's (1997) application of this concept to research, in her identification of first and second order stories or narratives.

KEYWORDS: collaborative change; evaluator as communicator/filter; organizational climate; organizational development; process versus product evaluation

Introduction

It has been widely accepted among educationalists that collaborative school development planning, involving all the relevant stakeholders, is a powerful tool

for educational improvement. In practice, however, tensions arise between the expectation that this type of planning will produce 'products' (measurable goals, targets and appraisals) and the notion that it is the 'process' of collaborative planning that will yield benefits.

This article reports on the evaluation of the whole school planning process in a large (50 teacher) post-primary school in North Dublin, conducted on behalf of the Department of Education and Science of Ireland. It explores the tensions that arose between the external requirements of the commissioning agency and the internal development of the project, and highlights some of the key evaluation issues which emerged. The most important of these were: the way in which the evaluators were drawn into the process and the evaluation itself became an intervention; the importance of dialogue and in particular sensitivity to the use of language in gaining acceptance for the evaluative process; the related issues of leadership and ownership in determining how the process is perceived by the stakeholders; and the use of particular approaches to narrative analysis in reporting the evaluation to different end users.

The article begins with a brief description of the educational context of the evaluation, particularly that of school development planning. It describes the project evaluated, concentrating on the evaluation method used. It concludes by analysing the key evaluation issues which emerged and places them in the context of the broader debate concerning tensions in evaluation between process and product, formative evaluation and accountability.

The Educational Context of the Evaluation: School Development Planning

Collaborative school development planning has become regarded by many educationalists as a key element in improving the quality of schools and education in general. A great deal of research has been conducted on the operation of school development planning and the following view of Hargreaves and Hopkins (1993: 57) would be widely accepted:

The research on 'effective schools', both in the UK (Mortimore et al., 1988) and in the USA (Purkey and Smith, 1983), has found that certain internal conditions are typical in schools that achieve higher levels of outcomes for their students.

By and large, the 'internal conditions' referred to above revolve around the capacity of each school to harness its own resources in the effective management of change. This in turn requires the 'empowerment' of the staff through shared 'ownership' of change and innovation, in a framework enabling each member to take a much fuller role in strategic planning and professional decision-making. The goal is to improve schools from within by employing teachers as active agents of change within their own organizations.

Hopkins and Laerweij (1996) summarize the emerging concept of school development planning and its relationship to evaluation as follows:

It provides a generic and paradigmatic process, combining as it does selected curriculum change with modifications to the school's management arrangements or

organization. *As compared with school review, where evaluation is the initial step in the cycle, development planning emphasizes evaluation occurring, often in different forms, throughout the process.* [Our emphasis] (p. 83)

However as this approach to change management has become more dominant, certain tensions have emerged. For example, there are contradictory pressures for centralized government control over policy and curricula on the one hand and decentralized responsibility for implementation, resource management and evaluation at local level on the other.

According to Hopkins et al. (1994b):

The key challenge, as a recent OECD report makes clear, is to find a balance between the increasing demands for centrally determined policy initiatives and quality control and the encouragement of locally developed school improvement efforts. (p. 68)

In Ireland, school improvement through whole school development planning has become a key element of educational policy. A measure of the importance attached to the concept of school development planning is indicated by the fact that it merits a specific chapter in the *White Paper on Education* (Government of Ireland, 1995). Chapter 12 states '... [that] it will be the responsibility of boards of management to ensure that all schools have development plans' (p. 157). This change in emphasis has begun to impact on the Irish education system at school level and is beginning to promote a more collaborative and collegial approach to school planning. The implication for teachers is that they are being encouraged to work collectively as a team, particularly in the development of the school plan.

However, the rhetoric-reality gap between policy and practice is particularly hard to break down in relation to school planning. Teachers continue to be suspicious of imposed or 'contrived' collegiality, particularly when accompanied by targets, performance criteria and appraisal systems. For example, research by Sugrue (1997) which sought the opinions of primary school principals and teachers on planning, found that most perceive it as a process over which teachers have little control.

In this context, the Department of Education and Science established a number of school development planning projects supported and evaluated by educational agencies. Part of the purpose was obviously to encourage collaborative planning in the particular schools chosen. However, it was also hoped that it would be possible to evaluate the outcomes with a view to developing models which could be replicated in other schools. The following project was one of these, initiated in a large North Dublin post-primary school and supported and evaluated by the School of Education Studies of Dublin City University.

The Evaluation of a School Development Planning Project

In accordance with the theoretical approach to school development planning advocated in the literature, the process of implementing the project was to be of an iterative and inductive nature, using a whole school staff development

approach. On the other hand, the Department of Education and Science required the specification of research objectives for the evaluation of the process. This requirement of setting terminal objectives for a developing process was to emerge as problematic in the course of the entire project. In order to satisfy the requirement, the Principal, staff representatives and Dublin City University consultants drew up a set of research objectives for the project.

The key objectives identified were as follows:

1. To provide an opportunity for teachers to formally engage in collaborative planning.
2. To use this process in the first instance to address the serious discipline problems facing the school in a positive way.
3. To enable teachers to develop a consistent strategy for engaging difficult students in effective learning.
4. To provide a coherent strategy for planning which could be used as an exemplar for implementation in other schools.

To make the process more manageable, the Principal chose a working group of eight to proceed with the project while constantly maintaining dialogue with the whole staff. The working group chose an action research approach to the project.

The model for the research approach chosen by the teacher researchers was based on the Deakin Action Research Model (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). Described by McKernan (1996) as 'critical emancipatory educational action research' (p. 24), this model contends that 'critical inquiry enables practitioners not only to search out the interpretive meanings that educational actions have for them but to organize action to overcome constraints' (p. 24). Critical emancipatory action research perceives educational problems as value-laden, with moral as well as technical concerns, representing what Habermas (1972) refers to as the two knowledge-constitutive interests: 'practical' and 'emancipatory'.

Table 1 is an adaptation of the Deakin Model (Carr and Kemmis, 1986) designed by the research team to cope with the central issues in the project.

The nature of the approach chosen informed the methodological stance to be adopted in the evaluation. An evaluation design located in the technical-rational or quantitative paradigm (Easterby-Smith, 1994) seemed inappropriate for a programme whose main procedure for implementation was to be action research as described above (O'Hara and McNamara, 1999). An attempt to combine pre-ordinate evaluation design with an iterative implementation process seemed not only inadvisable, but also potentially impossible.

For this reason, a decision was made to place the design within the broad confines of the naturalistic or qualitative paradigm, allowing it to develop in an iterative fashion closely mirroring the implementation process being monitored (Patton, 1997).

However, in addition to observing the implementation process, the evaluators were aware that it was **essential** to obtain data which could be used to assess the level to which the pre-specified programme objectives were achieved. In order to amass a sufficient quantity of data, it was decided to adopt a variety of data collection and analysis methods. Thus, instruments more normally associated with

Table 1. Adaptation of the Deakin Model (Carr and Kemmis, 1986)

	<i>Reconstructive</i>	<i>Constructive</i>
Discourse (among participants)	4 Reflect: Interview teachers to get an overall picture of the policy and process in the wider context of the school as a learning community. This creates the reconnaissance for future planning.	1 Plan: To provide a new discipline policy as per voluntary wishes of staff.
Practice (in the social context)	3 Observe: As participants, document issues arising, reflect on the value of the process and provide other participants with the opportunity to do same.	2 Act: Design, implement and evaluate a new approach to discipline. Support the course design and facilitation as much as possible, being aware of the diversity of participants' needs and schools' objectives.

an experimental methodological stance, such as questionnaires, document analysis and other psychometric instruments, were combined with in-depth interviews and participant observation in an attempt to give as complete a picture as possible of both the processes engaged in and the product resulting from the programme.

This approach generated a large volume of data and the decision was made to adopt the 'Data Analysis: Interactive Model' (Huberman and Miles, 1994: 428) consisting of connected functions of data collection, data display, data reduction, conclusion drawing and verification. In addition, the process of analysis was supported through the use of both the Atlas/ti qualitative data analysis software package (Muhr, 1997) and the SPSS quantitative data package.

Project Outcomes and Evaluation Insights

A distinction has to be drawn here between the outcomes of the evaluation in terms of 'product' and the deeper process insights which emerged as important issues of evaluation in general. It is the latter which will be of most interest to the evaluation community as a whole and which will be highlighted in this section. However, it is appropriate to summarize the results of the project in terms of the achievement of the original four objectives.

The nature of the action research approach adopted resulted in a collaborative, cyclical process, which involved the staff of the school in a very real experience of planning and reflecting. The process, which proved extremely complex and, at times, contentious, continued over three years and is now in a second three-year cycle. In terms of concrete outcomes, an elaborate approach to positive discipline throughout the school emerged, involving the development of negotiated school rules, emphasis on rewards rather than sanctions and consistency of implementation by teachers. The documents emerging from this element of the project are

currently being published by the Department of Education and Science, and are being supplemented by an in-service effort to encourage other schools to adopt them.

Seen at this level, therefore, it might appear that the goals of the project were fully met. However, when we turn to a deeper analysis of the evaluation, it can be argued that these successes may be more superficial than real and that interesting contradictions emerged at different levels of the evaluation. For example, there is evidence that while it produced the 'products' required or expected by the external agency, the process may also have generated tensions which call into question the value of the entire undertaking. It may also be that aspects of the very process of evaluation itself may have distorted or hampered the project under investigation. It is these, as it were, deeper outcomes of the evaluation process which provide the points of interest of relevance to the evaluation community as a whole and these are explored in the following sections.

The Evaluation of Collaborative Processes and the Issue of Ownership

The tensions inherent in evaluating collaborative planning processes, which by their nature will be cyclical and ongoing in the context of set objectives and goals laid down by external agencies, have already been referred to. In practice, it was found that there is a considerable danger of forcing the pace, seeking to impose solutions and growing impatient with the seemingly endless cycle of dialogue and reflection. These pressures can lead evaluations to damage or distort the process, even while apparently producing the required 'product'. Moreover in this case the intimate linking of the evaluation to the entire course of the project threw up issues of ownership and may well have contributed to the exacerbation of underlying tensions.

It is clear that important issues of ownership, leadership and collaborative dialogue continued to be problematic throughout the process and the evaluation team have attempted to identify why this should be so.

Firstly, while collaboration and participation are intrinsic to school-based planning, Gibson (1985) acknowledges the difficulties for would-be action researchers engaging at three levels 'interpersonal . . . institutional . . . structural' (Gibson cited in Webb, 1996: 68). This concern, particularly at school level where norms of isolation and self-sufficiency are pervasive, continues to be central and therefore teacher researchers and external evaluators, while aspiring to a collaborative working culture with all of the stakeholders, may find it difficult to achieve in practice. For instance, in this case the fact that several members of the teacher researcher team chose to use the work as a vehicle to obtain a post-graduate qualification became a deeply divisive issue within the whole staff. Suggestions were made that some staff apparently resented being used as a path to career advancement by the teacher researchers. This perception was confirmed by survey data gathered by the evaluators which indicates that the primary beneficiaries of the project were perceived by most staff to be the teacher researchers (O'Hara, 1998: 43).

Secondly, collaborative planning resonates with the 'ideal speech situation' referred to by critical theorists. While engaging in the research process, teachers

and evaluators act as critical friends to each other and to the rest of the staff. However, this characterization underplays the power relations between group members during this process and also between the group members and the evaluators. A number of steps were taken at various stages to equalize such relations: (i) negotiating while gaining access; (ii) developing guidelines for giving feedback; (iii) providing reflection and interview guidelines prior to interviews taking place; and (iv) engaging in shared reflective dialogue. However, a degree of alienation between researcher and the researched continued to hamper the process throughout. This was confirmed by the survey data collected in the course of the evaluation. While the staff felt they were allowed to contribute and were listened to, less than half (23.8% agreeing and 4.8% tending to agree) felt that their input was acted upon (O'Hara, 1998: 46). In addition, a majority of respondents disagreed that they had sufficient input into the programme design (with 28.2% disagreeing and 27.3% tending to disagree) (O'Hara, 1998: 58).

A third dimension, common to both collaborative planning and critical social science, relates to values. Action research requires practitioners to critique their espoused theories and their corresponding theories in action. Webb (1996) asks if this dialectic, theory and practice, can ever be resolved. This issue emerged in the project in the form of a perception that those most in need of engaging in critical self-reflection were the least likely to be willing to do so. In short, there was little sense that the internal collaboratively-based nature of the evaluation eliminated or reduced the defensiveness often caused by external modes of appraisal and inspection. This outcome perhaps challenges the considerable expenditure of resources which process evaluation requires.

Finally, both critical theory and action research espouse the emancipatory interest, that is, they both encourage the practitioner to develop a critical reflection, a critique of the social milieu within which the group operates. Action research thus seeks to lead participants in a reflexive and dialectical process of critique. Clearly this element of the process may have implications in terms of the issues of leadership and control, and can potentially lead to what Webb (1996) defines as the danger of false conformity where distortions are eliminated by group consensus. Webb, after Kemmis, states that 'the approach is only action research when it is collaborative'. However, this insistence on the group consensus may well produce that which action research seeks to avoid: 'false consciousness' and 'self delusion' (Webb, 1996: 69). An alternative scenario is one in which the critique which emerges is freely expressed, but, since it operates within a defined hierarchical management structure, serves little purpose other than to cause frustration and friction. Rather bizarrely, both scenarios emerged in this case with a reluctance to face certain issues, combined with resentment at the limits of the delegation of power which proved possible. For example, it was the Principal who chose the teachers for the research working group and provided them with support including the provision of reduced teaching duties. In addition, he broadly guided the direction taken by the group to ensure that its work would be of value to the organization. This resulted in resentment which was not directed openly at the Principal, for political reasons, but at the members of the research group. Clearly this type of outcome is extremely difficult for an

evaluation which is deeply immersed in the process to fully detect and certainly to highlight and report.

Evaluation as Intervention and the Reporting of Narrative Analysis

The evaluation, which was designed primarily to respect the cyclical and process nature of the project, began, perhaps as a result of the design, almost imperceptibly to play an increasing role in the development of the project. The deep immersion, or 'in-dwelling' in the words of Maykutt and Morehouse (1994), which is essential to an understanding of underlying processes in organizations, began to affect the relationship between the evaluators and the stakeholders in a research group. For example, given the iterative and at times convoluted nature of the implementation process being engaged in, there was increasing confusion among the wider school community as to the actual goals of the project.

For this reason, the process of data collection often served to clarify the goals underlying the programme for many of the staff who were not directly involved in the evolution of the development work. As such, the evaluation became an intervention and the evaluators became communicators and filters, a reality that did not sit happily with their perceived position as impartial detached observers. Also, as tensions increased between the stakeholders for the reasons considered earlier, the evaluators found it difficult to avoid becoming involved in the vagaries of individual fears, jealousies and inter-organizational politics.

This changing role also posed specific challenges in the areas of data collection and reporting. In the area of data collection, the micro-political climate influenced the type and style of information offered to the evaluators in the course of research interviews and had considerable influence on both the structural design and content of the final evaluation report.

The extent to which the evaluation became an intervention in the project and a part of the collaborative process, while still committed to an objectives-based report to be submitted to an external agency, raised issues around presentation and communication of findings. The culture of evaluation favoured by the external commissioning agency would be described by Daly (1997) 'as a contaminant that should be separated out, neutralized, minimized, standardized and controlled' (p. 354).

An evaluation design and experience which gradually placed the evaluator at the centre of a complex web of communications seems antithetical to this view of the role. In order to meet this genuine concern regarding the independence of the findings produced, the evaluator was forced to analyse data at two levels. This was done by adopting a model of data analysis suggested by Daly (1997). She posits the idea that all data, and particularly data drawn from a qualitative perspective, are essentially narrative. Further, Daly argues that narratives can be of the first order or the second order. She defines them as follows:

A first order story is the local narrative embedded in the lived experience of people being studied . . . A second order story is an interpretative commentary on these lived stories. It is a scientific story embedded in the lived and observing experience and language of the social scientist. (Daly, 1997: 355)

In the context of this particular evaluation study, the first order story consisted of the interviews, participant observations, open-ended questionnaires and action research reports. At this level the evaluator influenced the style and content of much of these data. At the level of the second order stories, an attempt is made to frame the data presented in contextual language and to communicate the local narrative to a wider audience. The production of these second order stories in this specific evaluation involved the use of the 'Data Analysis: Interactive Model' (Huberman and Miles, 1994: 428). The model proved particularly useful in developing the type of narrative that could, in the words of Daly:

represent the local narrative within a broader range of communities: the local one from which it arises . . . and a host of other professional and political communities who may use the story for a variety of social action aims. (Daly, 1997: 356)

In essence, therefore, the style of analysis and final report rejected Denzin and Lincoln's (1994) 'fallacy of objectivism' (p. 10) by acknowledging the role played by the evaluator in the development of the process. The depth of narrative provided in the final report, coupled with the identification of key data necessary for the assessment of the pre-specified program aims, resulted in the production of an evaluation that sought to meet two very different objectives. It attempted to assess the success of the programme using the criteria agreed by the funders, while at the same time providing a rich description of the actual process engaged in. This, of course, is the theory but in practice the tensions here are great. It may be that this first and second order approach to analysis and presentation is, as Daly suggests, parallel but in practice operates at two very different depths – one surface where products are easy enough to define, but also a deeper level where processes remain ambiguous and contradictory.

Conclusion

Evaluation is a complex procedure at the best of times, but the evaluation of processes such as school development planning creates particularly interesting issues and dilemmas. These include questions concerning tensions in the process/product debate, contradictions between organizational development and accountability and problems around the role and functions of evaluators. It is hard to see any clear-cut solutions to these problems and, in fact, solutions may not be what is required. Just as 'multiple realities' and 'living with ambiguity' are part and parcel of much qualitative research, so it probably follows that process-oriented evaluations may have to live with the same unresolved problems.

In terms of the project reported here, the results were indeed multiple; some very positive, some contradictory and some worrying, with side-effects within the organization. Importantly, however, an apparent commitment emerged to continue with collaborative planning which is now in a second three-year cycle in the school. (Even here, however, ambiguities continue, in that it seems that the locus of power in this second cycle has returned very much to the Principal).

Perhaps the most interesting impact of the evaluation was that the issues raised within it appear to have affected the national whole school planning pilot project

involving 35 schools which followed on from it. It is notable that, in relation to this new research, the Department of Education and Science has displayed a much greater concern with dialogue, agreement, non-threatening language, non-specific objectives and process-centred evaluation. In addition there was a real emphasis placed on the benefits of the engagement for each individual school rather than on immediate expectations of definite generalizable outcomes. It seems that the example of this project may have made some contribution to an understanding that school development planning and its evaluation are not really two separate processes at all. Rather they are like two sides of the same window, the marriage of Habermas's practical and emancipatory knowledge. This is a conclusion that has considerable implications for the conduct of evaluations in education and in other fields.

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JOE O'HARA is a Lecturer at the School of Education Studies, Dublin City University. His areas of research include investigations into the role of evaluation as a catalyst for organizational change and the changing role of the evaluator in collaborative organizational settings. He has worked as an evaluator on a number of national programmes and is currently acting as a UNDP project evaluator. Please address correspondence to: Joe O'Hara, School of Education Studies, Dublin City University, Dublin 9, Ireland. [email: joe.ohara@dcu.ie]

GERRY McNAMARA is Head of the School of Education Studies, Dublin City University. His major areas of research interest include practitioner-led school-based research, organizational change and improvement and curriculum development and evaluation. He has published extensively both nationally and internationally and has acted as programme evaluator on a number of transnational programmes. Please address correspondence to: Gerry McNamara, School of Education Studies, Dublin City University, Dublin 9, Ireland. [email: gerry.mcnamara@dcu.ie]