Seeking insights into sustainable leadership in ireland's schools

Leading an Innovation at the level of the School

School Self-Evaluation in Ireland:

Against a backdrop of international discourse on educational systematic reform, over the last twenty-five years, the Irish education system introduced the concept of individual school self- evaluation (SSE) in 2012. In the primary sector, as phase one (2012-2016) ended, it had little time to be absorbed as a concept, never mind the practical tool of school improvement that it had set out to be, when it crashed into the rocks of industrial tensions and unrest. The teachers' union recommended non-cooperation with SSE, as they claimed that the capacity of schools to engage with and manage the process, was disastrously eroded by a moratorium on promotion (February 2016). The lifting of the moratorium in October 2017, meant that from spring 2018, phase two, (2016-20), could be introduced, albeit it, after a two year gap. It was an inauspicious start for the policy that had gained legitimacy as the solution to international school improvement and quality assurance.

Irish educational policy is increasingly located in an international setting (Lynch, Grummell, & Devine, 2012, p 4), and it displays many features of the neo-liberal, English-speaking world. New managerialism, which is the application of business managerial practices and techniques such as target-setting, evidence-based decision-making, performance indicators etc., have been applied to a greater and greater extend in all aspects of the public service, including education. These managerial techniques give a framework for target-management and a lens through which the current working practices can be viewed. They have provided for the focus to move from

strict external inspection and evaluation to internal regulation and self-evaluation. Since 2003, the Department of Education and Science (DES), in their document ' Looking at Our schools', nailed their colours to the SSE mast by writing:

" Ireland, along with other European Countries, is adopting a model of quality assurance, that emphasises school development planning through internal school review and self-evaluation with the support of external evaluation carried out by the inspectorate".(p. viii)

The intention has been, from that point, to improve learning and learning outcomes, by looking at school practices, looking closely at teaching and learning and building leadership capacity within the schools in Ireland. " School Self-evaluation is a way of working that provides one coherent internal improvement process for schools"(Department of Education and Science, 2016 p. 6). The clear shift in official policy towards " internally driven self-review"(McNamara & O'Hara, 2005, p 268), became the desired method of achieving the goals of school accountability and school improvement. It has evolved into a six-point framework: identify the focus; gather evidence; analyse and make judgements; write and share report and improvement plan; put improvement plan into action; monitor actions and evaluate impact.

I have chosen to situate a literary review, a case study of the processes involved in introducing SSE in a primary school, and a conceptual framework of the leadership of change, in the heart of the school self-evaluation process. I can see that the process will not be un-problematic as already

certain questions are being asked; is too much being asked of school leadership?; is it being implemented at a time when adequate resources are being directed towards schools to support the initiative?; will it suffer the fate of previous policy fashions, which fall into the all-too familiar cycle of initial enthusiasm, followed by " the conclusion that the reform has failed to bring about the desired results, abandonment of the reform, and the launch of a new search for the next promising initiative"(DuFour, R, 2004 p. 1)?

School Self Evaluation: A literary review 1992-2018

The methodologies used 2w1sasaas follows:

1. Input search terms such as ' school self-evaluation' and ' leadership' ' international studies' into the data bases, British Educational Index, Eric, Academic Search complete and Scopus.
2. Applied time period 1990-2018.
3. Read titles and abstracts, retaining any relevant articles.
4. Final selection of documents for critical review
5. Searched data base of Irish Teachers' Journal for relevant articles.
6. Identified relevant DES documents and circulars

This chronological review of the literature that has been published in the domain of school self-evaluation was guided by the following key questions:

1. What is the historical nature of SSE in Ireland?
2. Have there been any comparative studies between Ireland and other countries from which we can learn valuable lessons?

3. What problems have been identified by countries who may be ten to fifteen years ahead of Ireland in the implementation of the process?

History:

It would be easy to see the introduction of SSE in Ireland through the prism of the neo-liberal influences of competition, decentralisation, and the application of business administration techniques to education. It could be seen through the framework of a new educational directive weighing heavily on the workload of school leaders and teachers, at a time when the country was trying to recover from a national economic crash and had cut salaries, frozen all promotional prospects for teachers and could offer no financial support for the initiative., Or perhaps, it was a political response to international results agenda of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2010, when Ireland did not perform will in the domains of literacy and numeracy, and the political agenda of seeing education as the key to future economic development in a globalised market.

All of these influences did bear heavily on its introduction but the global thinking that was moving towards SSE started in England as early as the 1970's (Leung K. L., 2005, p. 2) and has become the backbone of educational reform worldwide. McBeath (McBeath, J, 1992) had formulated a process and a series of questionnaries for teachers, parents and students in order to begin a process of self-evaluation, as early as 1992. McNamara and O'Hara have written extensively (McNamara & O'Hara, 2005, 2008, 2011) about the process of educational reform that proceeded the 2012 introduction of the SSE into the Irish system. They highlight the Education Act of 1998, which

resulted in the development of a ' school plan' for all schools, which was guided by frameworks, guidelines and facilitators. In the late 1990's the DES embarked on a pilot project to test an approach to school-based evaluation supported by external inspection (McNamara et al., 2005, p. 269). The whole-school evaluation (WSE) was to report on three key features of Irish schools;

- The quality of school planning
- The quality of teaching and learning
- The quality of school management

The WSE project did retain elements of external inspection and were not in favour of a system of self-evaluation only. By 2003 the DES had unambiguously chosen the process of self-evaluation and outlined a process in the Looking At Our Schools document (LAOS) (Looking at our Schools, DES 2003) However, McNamara argues the emerging weaknesses in the WSE, especially the un-realistic extent of the framework itself,(five areas of evaluation divided into 143 themes for self-evaluation) and how " gathering and analysing information"(McNamara et al, 2005 p. 278) was to be carried out, were not addressed in the LAOS.

During the latter part of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the international belief in evaluation, inspection and appraisal, which depending on your point of view was either neo-liberalism or much needed reform in public management, was deepening, especially in the English-speaking world. The landscape of educational policy was moving from trust in the

pedagogical expertise of teachers, to the reductionist rhetoric of school accountability.

Language in the documents that

McNamara, O'Hara (2005 & 2008) McNamara, O'Hara, Lisi & Davidsdottir (2011), Nayir & McNamara (2015)and Sugrue (2006) examine closely the language used in the development of the documents from the birth of the WSE to the SSE guidelines in 2012. " Considerable attention was given to developing an acceptable cultural and contextual language" (2005, p. 268). The language had moved from ' Whole school inspection' (WSI), using ' performance indicators'(PI's), to whole school *evaluation,* (WSE) to *evaluation criteria* , and subsequently from evaluation criteria to ' area', ' aspect' and ' theme' and ultimately to ' domains', ' standards' and ' statements'. The language of new public management which had pervaded policy rhetoric in other areas of the public service, was consciously avoided. This did not happen in the OFSTED led English system where ' regimes of accountability', ' performance cycle', ' surveillance and management of professional delivery' (Sugrue, C. & Mertkan, S., 2015 p 180) dominated. In interrogating the rhetoric of the School-Self Evaluation Plan 2016-2020 (DES, Inspectorate) I still see more evidence of the language trust and collaboration, of responsibility and opportunity, than accountability and external regulation. However, if we place Irish Education on the international stage, and look closely at the trajectory of the neo-liberal agenda in English-speaking countries such as England and the USA, a trajectory that has been mapped out by Mooney Simmie (2012) and Sugrue (Sugrue, Ciarán 2015b), it would be inappropriately pre-emptive to assume that this will continue.

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